

Write a Dear Reader Contest Entries for 2009

Several book club readers sent an email suggesting that I post all of the entries to the annual Write a Dear Reader Contest and I thought it was a great idea, too! Hundreds of people entered this year's contest, so for easier access, I've divided up the entries into three files.

Have fun reading the entries and who knows, you just might be inspired to get a jump on next year's contest! It's never too early to start writing. If you're not already reading with me at one of the book clubs, visit www.DearReader.com and join a club.



Thanks for reading with me. It's so good to read with friends.

-- Suzanne Beecher
Suzanne@Emailbookclub.com

You'll find more Write a Dear Reader Contest entries at:

<http://www.dearreader.com/DR2009/writedearreader2009b.pdf>

<http://www.dearreader.com/DR2009/writedearreader2009c.pdf>

Dear Reader,

Several years ago while visiting a travelling quilt exhibition held to raise money for breast cancer research, I experienced one of those "a-ha! moments" that you hear people talk about from time to time. The hall was filled with many beautiful quilts and wall hangings, each accompanied by a short text written by the quilter(s) explaining why they had been inspired to make their quilt.

I was immediately attracted to a small, but colourful wall hanging that, according to the story, was called "The Good China." The banner featured several rows of cups and saucers, as if hanging in a china cabinet. The description explained that the quilter's sister had died of breast cancer at a young age. She revealed that her motivation for the quilt was that often in life, we save our "good china" for special occasions and the rest of the time it hides away in a cupboard. The woman noted that her sister's death reminded her that we should use our good china and wear our special clothing often and appreciate their beauty while we are able to enjoy them.

When I was born, my grandmother made me a beautiful, handmade quilt in the Dresden

Plate pattern and it adorned my bed for several years. When Grandma died unexpectedly, I recall my mother swooping into my bedroom one day and removing the quilt from my bed saying that since Grandma wouldn't be able to make me another quilt that we should put this one away and save it.

The next time that I was home visiting my parents after seeing the quilt exhibit, I went down to the basement and dug Grandma's quilt out of the cedar chest where it had been packed away for years. I told my mother that I was taking it back to my apartment so that I could enjoy it and I related the story of "The Good China" wall hanging. She agreed and said that is what Grandma would have wanted.

Now, I use my quilt every day and as I look at the blocks, lovingly quilted more than 40 years ago from Grandpa's worn shirts and Grandma's old dresses and blouses, I am reminded of their love for me.

Don't save your good china--make every day a special occasion.

Christine Hughes

Dear Reader,

I've spent the last year working on weight issues, but I'm not at my goal yet. The final thing holding me back is exercise. I know I should do it several times a week, but I haven't found an exercise routine I would enjoy doing. Not for me the Abs of Steel or strength training. I want something that's fun.

With that in mind, I got my old bike tuned up. I even invested in a cushy new seat. When I asked the guy at the bike store if the seat was going to be comfortable, he said, 'They don't call it Cloud Nine for nothing!' And he installed it for free along with my tune up.

My husband and I took our first spin through the neighborhood. It's true you don't forget how to do it but it was more effort than I remembered. We passed two young girls on their bikes as we rode down a street with a bit of a hill. I called over, 'I hope I can ride back up this hill. But I see you managed it okay.' The little one, a curly headed moppet on a pink bike looked at us and said, 'Yeah, but we're a lot younger than you!' I judged her to be about seven and I could have been her grandma. Pride propelled me back up the hill without walking the bike, although I was laughing all the way.

At the top, she called out, 'Come this way. You can really zoom here!' Zoom I did, off the road and face first into the neighbor's mulch. At least it was a soft landing. I missed a tree and the bike didn't need to go back for repairs. As I got back on my bike, my little friend offered to coach me because she noticed I was a little bit wobbly. I peddled harder and she yelled, 'You're doing great. You're riding straighter.'

I waved good bye and laughing like crazy, explained to my husband how I ended up face first in the dirt. I'm sure the little girl had a good story to tell her parents about the old

lady that needed bike lessons. I've certainly gotten lots of laughs sharing my most memorable bike ride with friends.

Helene DeFoe

Dear Reader,

My mother taught me to embroider when I was 6 and to crochet when I was 8. I became fascinated with all types of needlework and have been happily stitching since then. The threads and yarns are so colorful and the textures so different. Counted cross stitch, needlepoint, and crewel embroidery were added to my favorite things to do.

Then 7 years ago when I was 49 tragedy struck in the form of carpal tunnel syndrome. No longer can I work with a needle, yarn, and thread.

A couple of years later while mourning my loss, a very dear friend asked me if I had considered machine quilting. There was a light at the end of my very gloomy tunnel.

We went shopping and to my surprise there was a whole new world of tactile enjoyment waiting for me. The fabrics and threads are so lovely. The patterns are bright and happy.

Over the past 5 years I have learned a lot and gotten much better at my new hobby. Of course there was the initial investment of a sewing machine. After test driving a few machines the Baby Lock and its numerous stitches came to live with me.

Then there is the fabric, pattern books (you have to have books), and thread. I have an armoire and chest of drawers filled with a lovely fabric stash. My understanding is that for a quilter this is a small amount of fabric so I try to add to it on a regular basis. I also have the requisite UFOs (unfinished objects) that all quilters have laying around. Apparently no quilter worth their salt has less than 3 projects going at any given time.

My husband did a lovely thing for me last year. He remodeled a room and made it a sewing room. It is where I spend a lot of time. My younger son says I am making heirlooms for family and friends and that the one I made just for him is the prettiest.

As for me, I am carrying on my mother's tradition of needlework. Just in a different way.

Janie Jones

Dear Reader,

We decided to take our family fishing for the afternoon on a small lake. By family I mean me, my husband, and our four kids. Our kids are ages 3, 5, 8, and 10. With promises of a trip to McDonalds after fishing, we left with the boat. The trip went kind of like this:

“Move Max! You gotta move! I'm gonna hook you if you don't move!”

“Jeremy! Where are you fishing?”
“Cameron, don’t stand up in the boat.”
“Cameron, where are you going?”
“Can someone get my Gatorade?”
“I’m not fishing anymore.”
“I’m hot!”
“Can you scoot over more? A little more.”
“We need a bigger boat.”
“Oh man, I just spilled the chips!”
“Don’t step on the cookies!”
“I got one!”
“Luke don’t, that’s Max’s”
“I need to sit over there.”
“My shoe! Mom get my shoe!”
“I want to go back.”
“Cameron just colored on the boat. Oh no, don’t tell dad.”
“What?”
“Nothing..”
“When are we gonna go?”
“Luke don’t hit Max!”
“Max sit down.”
“Did somebody just fart?”
“OWWWWWW!!”
“*#* @*^&*% ^%&^”
“Where are the worms?”
“Don’t put that in your mouth.”
“Man, these life jackets are hot.”
“Stop it!”
“I’ve got a headache.”
“I want to get going. I want to get going. I want to get going.”
“Luke can’t sit here.”
“Stop you’re going to tip the boat.”
“Your squishing me.”
“Where are they going?”
“They’re leaving, how come we can’t leave?”
“Jeremy and Dad reel it in.”
“We need to leave it is PM39.”
“What does that mean?”
“It means its late.”
“I’m bored.”
“Dad can we go to McDonalds?”
“We’ll see.”
“There could be sharks in there.”
“Man, these life jackets are hot!”
“I know, mine too.”
“Should I take mine off?”
“Dad lets go.”

“We’ll go when I say we go.”

“Huh?”

“You heard me.”

“There Dad caught a fish, now we can leave.”

“Jeremy help her.”

“Well, what am I suppose to do?”

“Mom take a picture.”

“I’m getting bites.”

“Let’s just leave. I like leaving.”

After about an hour of our exciting fishing trip, we did leave and yes, we did go to McDonalds as promised. We managed to have some laughs with some yelling, and caught some fish. I’d call that fun.

Tammy Oskey

Dear Reader,

Obviously, like me, you are a committed reader. My commitment began as my mama would snuggle up beside me when I was 2 and 3 years old and read to me, side by side. She had recently gone through a divorce and it was just the 2 of us, with her sister and their folks.

I learned to read at age 3, because I was committed to being like my mom, and she so loved to read and learn. Committed my mom was, because she went back to school, finished the last 2 years of her degree, earning a place on the dean’s list and joined Phi Beta Kappa. She was committed to ‘not waste daddy’s money.’

Committed to work, my mom was. Before the days when primary school teachers could purchase craft kits, my mom would hand-draw her own charts, using India Ink and watercolors, hands and knees on her parents’ living room floor, toiling away. Committed to learning, was I, as I repeatedly asked her (to no avail), ‘can we play school?’ Eventually, the response was, ‘do you realize that you are asking me to work?’

Committed to being a good parent, teacher, sister and friend my mom was. And she was committed to life and having fun. Mom’s creativity expanded to making her own (beyond funny) Mother’s Day cards and other special occasion cards with goofy pictures.

Committed am I to continue that tradition. We worked together on the last idea and I will finish it.

You see, I am now committed to promoting the book club, sure, but even more so now to recognize the power of dedicated and committed teachers, instead of this obsession with ‘celebrities.’ The real celebrities are among us and go unheralded. Mom died on June 25th. I am now committed to dissolve her Living Trust and establish my own to

keep my commitment to mom, myself and my family. Be committed ' rise up and thank your past teachers and librarians. Volunteer and go beyond your comfort zone. I was committed to do so. Thank you, Suzanne for your commitment.

Be committed. You are valued.

'Committed' Dear Reader submission
Christie A. Prochnow

Dear Reader,

We fail to mourn

A staple of life that is no longer mandatory

Homelessness, poverty, death

We cannot sleep for all the wrong reasons

Countless shadows beyond the barriers

Assembled by our gated mentalities

We do not touch because we are blind to the hand that

Reaches out to be acknowledged

They are invisible

Our insatiable appetite for cheap goods

Trumps the tranquility of family and the dignity due

To those whose lot is hauntingly bitter

We fail to mourn for

Wildlife scattered and thrust into the strange world of

Human chaos fueled by

Greed and lust for comfort at the expense of the land made barren

There is never enough for those who worship the god of progress

We fail to mourn

The lives dissected into bleak futures in the name of the bottom line and

The shareholder stomping of

Feet like little children who don't get their way

Of course the little darlings always get their way now

The folly of time has dictated this quandary

We fail to mourn

Words that dismember the spirit

Cutting

Gossip

Calumny

Factions

The fuel of war and strife

What a self righteous cancer of an existence

We must mourn

And pray to God that we find our way

Grasp for a mustard seed of faith

That we might dispel the Creator's tears

Frank DeBoever

Dear Reader,

Last Christmas, inside a soft, lumpy package from 'Santa' (whose writing looked suspiciously like my best friend's), was a bright green t-shirt with 'Proud to be a Farm Girl' scrawled on it in delicate white letters. I cried; those words brought back a flood of memories.

I remembered being taunted by 'Faaaaaarm Girl!' on the elementary school playground because of my muddy boots, and later in the high school cafeteria because of my

homemade lunches and hand-knit sweaters. While being a farm kid in our 1960s small western Pennsylvania town wasn't unheard of, the insults from the 'cool kids' cut like a knife.

I remembered later sharing with surprised colleagues that I 'grew up on a dairy farm' and hearing them remark 'how interesting'.

I remembered my dad rising faithfully each morning to milk a hundred Holsteins, and then doing it all over again after supper. I remembered him coming home late in the evening; exhausted, smelling of cows and silage, carrying a gallon of fresh milk. I remembered my brothers growing up quickly, with responsibilities far beyond their years. I remembered my mom, always there.

I remembered learning to cook, bake, garden, mow, drive a stick shift, build fires, bait fishing hooks, pick fruit, vegetables and berries from the garden and woods, fix bikes, wash cars, change tires, bale hay, and feed calves. I remembered the Great Stoneboro Fair, Bible school, picnics, and feeling connected. I remembered Mama's pecan pie and Grandma's Thanksgiving stuffing. I remembered sledding down pasture hills and using huge icicles hanging from the barn as giant swords.

I remembered homesickness and taking my kids back each season to soak up the beauty of farm and family. I remembered seeing them thrive in the sun and the snow, at the barns and in the woods. I remembered the 'ring of fire' surrounding my mom's white farm house when acres of maples, oaks, and aspens showed their blazing colors each fall.

I remembered going nursing school awed and amazed that a farmer was able to send five children to college without borrowing a dime.

I remembered how I love that my neighbor yelps 'Hey Farm Girl!' to me in my suburban tomato patch.

Mostly I remembered with an overwhelming sense of gratitude why I am indeed, Proud to be a Farm Girl.

Susan L. Bindon

Dear Reader,

National Public Radio hosts have been talking to different people about songs that mean "summer" to them. As I thought about what I would say if they asked me (they haven't!), there was only one song it could be...

The first car I really remember my parents owning was my mom's green Dodge Dart. I don't know what year it was, but it had to be mid 70's. It had black vinyl seats that were sure to scorch the backsides of your thighs in the summer, no air conditioning (of course),

and an AM radio only. I remember it distinctly, because that was the car we most often took to the beach. It was about a 45 minute ride, and the whole time I spent craning to hear the radio over the wind whipping in through the open windows, including the funny triangular one that pushed outward from the back seat. Would we hear IT on the way to the beach today??

I'm not sure how old I was at the time, but I think it was before the purchase of the Shawn Cassidy record that came with the poster that had to go on the bathroom door so that it was neither in mine nor my sister's room. I think I had a sense that there was "kid" music and "adult" music, and that what my folks listened to wasn't cool. So I suffered through the AM radio station, until I heard IT.

IT was the Andrews Sisters singing "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy of Company B." The harmony just about glued me to those hot black seats. I never knew human voices could work together in such a way so that you KNEW there was more than one singer, but you could barely tell where one voice started and the other stopped. I didn't know what "eight to the bar" was and didn't care – just keep singing about the trumpet man from out Chicago way.

I felt incredibly lucky if we heard the song...it didn't matter if the backs of my knees were sweaty or if my younger sister was on "my side" of the back seat. It was summer, we were going to the beach, and the company was jumping when he played Reveille.

Beth Koenigsbauer

Dear Reader,

My story

I remember a picture mama kept in the bottom drawer of her wardrobe. I saw it when mama was taking something out, or adding something to the drawer. The frame that had once held the picture was broken. As I grew older I learned that the young man in the picture was my mother's first husband and father of Wesley, my oldest brother.

Over the years I grew to understand the story behind the picture, and though my mother is no longer living, she remains an inspiration. My mother was born in 1900, the third child of ten born to her parents. On August 24, 1918, my mother and the man in the picture, Guy, were married. They were both eighteen years old. In January 1919 Guy's mother died during the flu epidemic and he attended her funeral. The next week Guy died with the flu. My mother moved back to the home of her parents. Wesley was born on July 8, 1919.

On December 3, 1922, my mother and dad were married when Wesley was three years old. Wesley remembers my mother and dad dating, and before leaving to go on a date with my dad, and she would spend time with him.

My parents had twelve more children, ten lived to be adults and two baby girls lived only a day. We were raised on a farm where my mother always had a cow for milk, grew a garden of fresh vegetable in the summer, and canned enough to last the winter months. Cotton was our main crop and provided much exercise for me and my brothers and sisters. We spent many days chopping the grass and weeds away from the plants, and then picking the cotton in the fall.

During the years of World War II, Wesley and my next oldest brother, Oliver, Jr., were away in Europe, when my younger sister and brother were born. They came home when the war was over to meet two new siblings.

On February 6, 1957, my dad died from lung disease, the week before I was sixteen. With some of the money from my dad's insurance my mother had monuments erected, one for my dad and one each for the babies that had died, because before there had only been the little metal and glass markers. We knew our mother never forgot the babies that died and made sure we knew their names.

My mother died at the age of eighty-two. Wesley, who is now ninety years old, has the picture of his dad in a new frame in his den.

Ann Spann

Dear Reader,

How Bob Got His Name

It was a cold snowy evening back in 1992. I was becoming over-whelmed with my task at hand. I was the principal care-giver for my beloved wife, age 41, who was dying of cancer.

During her long illness, she never complained. She would look up at me with her big beautiful eyes and only ask for child-like things. Maybe a Coca Cola or some candy. Her brain cancer had reduced her to a child-like mind.

That particular evening she wanted to know if I would "sneak" her a Coca Cola. She thought that she had guards who wouldn't approve of a late night snack or drink. I assured her that I would get her anything she wanted.

When I came back from the kitchen with her treat she said "Bob (my real name is David), you are just so good to me. I want to talk to your supervisor. I' m going to get you a raise." She had in her mind that I ran the kitchen in a home with guards. She recognized nothing of the home we had shared for years. In her mind I was just "Bob".

I continued to care for her every need until her death the following spring. I had lost my only true love.

Well, God was good to me and I was later married to another wonderful woman. We have been married 15 years. While we were dating, I told her the story of “Bob”.

All of her e-mails are addressed to Bob. She loved my love and dedication to her predecessor.

It was certainly good to love again.

Love.
BOB
David C. Gillaspy

Dear Reader,

I didn't want a dog! I used every excuse not to get one because a dog takes work! When did I lose sight of what a dog brings?

For the last year, my daughter Emily has been taking care of a dog every day after school to earn money to buy her own dog. She has sponsored pet events (teaching dogs how to brush their teeth) yes, she really believed that she could train them to do this. Wouldn't it be nice if we always believed we could accomplish the impossible! We have now adopted, a very sweet Coon Hound mix named Kylee. There couldn't be a better choice for my sweet Emily.

I had lost sight of what having a dog really means. Growing up, I had a vivacious boxer dog named Sugar Rae. She ushered me from 5th grade, to junior high and high school and all the angst that goes with it. She never thought I wasn't pretty enough, or thin enough. She would wait at the door for me to come home and give me a conspiratorial glance when I was in past. Even though she had cancer, she hung on until my first day of college, when I got home she was playful like she hadn't been in ages. Then that evening she couldn't walk and she looked at me with pleading eyes that begged me to help her and I knew that I had to. I got to hold her and tell her good bye as the vet gave her that last shot and she regarded me with gratitude. I knew that it was best, yet I ached to be losing my old friend.

I now wonder if my excuses to not get a dog had more to do with avoiding that kind of attachment than to what they need. I now think about what a dog brings to a home: They make you smile the second you walk into the house. They bring endless amounts of entertainment. They get so excited about everything and bring that joy wherever they go. When you are with a dog everyone is your friend. Strangers smile at you. Dogs make kids believe that anything is possible! And with a dog by your side, anything is possible!

Shanna Loewen

Dear Reader,

She is who I strive to be like. She is my grandmother. I am closer to her than anyone. There isn't a time in my life that I can't recall not being able to turn to my mamaw. About her. In 1972 my mamaw became a widow. Her husband was killed leaving her with five children to raise. Four boys and a girl. She had to be a mom, and provider. She raised her kids. She shed her tears wiped them away rolled up her sleeves and kept on with life. Her daughter is my mother and when I was five years old my mom moved back into mamaw's house. This is where my memories began.

Just some memories to show why she is who I write about. I can recall days of her singing and playing the guitar, out in the garden. Her telling me to dry my tears things will get better. It was always mamaw I remember turning to. At nine I had a horrible accident that had me in the hospital a year. This is around the time she started driving a 18 wheeler to help provide for her family and around the time she became a Christian. I had my mother of course but it's mamaw's visits I recall most during that time.

At thirteen things happened that put me in a custody battle. And here at this point in my life I remember my mamaw standing up to my parents telling them to straiten up or she would take custody.

In 2004 she lost her mother. That day what really brought me to tears is when I seen my mamaw's pain. It's then that hits me if something happened to her I couldn't bear it. I cry over her pain more than anything that day. She had always been there for me and I want to be there for her.

Even today as a mom myself I turn to her and get advice, call her up to just say I love you. I did that today and she says did you just call to say that. Which I reply yes and she tells me she isn't a hero and I tell her to me she is. She says thanks and I love you to you're my baby.

Amy Bundy

Dear Reader,

It's something I've wanted to do for a long time, almost six years now, and finally, I am. Now that my youngest son is going to school all day, there's no reason that I shouldn't. It would be silly not to, really. I mean, if not now, when? I know what you're thinking, but it's not something thrilling, like sky-diving, or a little bit naughty, like getting a tattoo, or even something benevolent, like donating my hair to charity. It's nothing like any of those things. In fact, it's such a simple thing, I doubt most people would even understand the edge-of-your-seat anticipation, the giddiness, I'm feeling. But when you build something up in your mind for so long, it shines a little more brightly for you than for others. Are you ready? Are you sitting down? Can you stand it?

I'm having lunch by myself today, at a restaurant where the food doesn't come in boxes with a toy, and the catsup pours out of a bottle, or maybe even comes in a cup on a plate

with a sprig of parsley or kale beside, if I'm lucky. I'll order from a menu I hold in my hands, not one I squint at from across a counter or through a car window. The food will come to me, at my table, and I won't have to cut anyone's meat, or open anyone's barbeque sauce, or ask for extra napkins to mop up spilled chocolate milk. I'll drink water from a glass made of glass, and the silverware will be, well, silver-colored, anyway. There won't be peanut shells or sawdust on the floor, and hopefully, the serving staff won't break into a song or line dance for someone's birthday. I won't have to take anyone but myself to the bathroom.

To you, it's just lunch. You eat it every day, right? Probably by yourself. Maybe at your desk, maybe in your car, maybe in a restaurant with glass glasses. But to me, dining solo midday for the first time in years is an almost forgotten nirvana.

The hostess is smiling at me. The adventure begins...my table for one is ready.

Katina Scarbrough

Dear Reader,

Do you have a memory of something from your childhood that made a lasting impression? During my early grade school years I spent one week each summer with my grandmother – my Maw-Maw. It was a very special time for me. As I was the only grandchild visiting, I reaped all of the attention from Maw-Maw.

Maw-Maw always kept a supply of large bottles of Pepsi in the refrigerator and gingersnap cookies in her old glass cookie jar. Maw-Maw and I would work in the vegetable garden in the cool mornings; I picked beans, tomatoes, okra and blackberries, and she kept the garden well weeded. She would reward me for helping with a break to enjoy a large, cold Pepsi and some gingersnap cookies. I still remember the wonderful taste of her gingersnap cookies.

My Aunt Barbara, Maw-Maw's daughter, was in high school and still living at home. She treated me to big girl hairstyles and painted fingernails. The summer before I started second grade, Aunt Barbara painted my nails a lovely lavender color. I was very careful to protect the polish on my nails to help them last as long as possible.

Summer ended and school started again. Each morning the schoolteacher, Mrs. Woodruff, did inspections of every student in the class. Her inspection included an examination of our hands and fingernails for cleanliness. Every student wanted to receive a checkmark for having clean hands and fingernails. When Mrs. Woodruff inspected my hands and saw the lavender polish, she asked why I had such an awful color on my nails. She did not give me a checkmark for that day. I was crushed by her disapproval.

Even today, fifty years later, I have a lasting memory of that day. Each time I reach for nail polish, I am reminded of how a thoughtless comment turned innocence into self-consciousness.

Mary Rodriguez

Dear Reader,

WASL's forever! I got these words at the end of an email from a friend in Asheville, NC. I sent her email on to a friend and he emailed me back wanting to know what WASL meant. So I will tell him. 25 years ago, I joined a hiking club in Florida, where I live. Yes, we do have hiking in Florida. We mostly hike in the winter, because we have a lot of "snowbirds" in our group and also the summers are HOT. Over the years I met many different types of people, doctors, schoolteachers, construction workers, truck drivers, etc. With one thing in common, we loved to hike and walk. A group of us started doing other things, cards, going to ball games, lunch and movies every Wednesday. We joined another walking group and then went on trips. We went to St Augustine, Savannah and all the places around Florida. We even went to Dollywood one year. We also go to NC every spring and fall and stay with another WASL and go to a Naturalist Rally in TN. Some of us have moved away, cannot hike anymore because of physical problems, deaths and illness, but we still keep in touch and visit when we can. And yes we still hike. Oh, we got the name from one of us in WI. She belonged to a hiking club there and a member would always say when they met, "we are so lucky." And so am I, to have all these wonderful friends in my life. May all of you reading this find your own WASL group.

Jan Meeks

Dear Reader,

The sights, sounds and feel of an early Autumn are manifesting every day. Crickets are getting louder and trying to come inside. The loud sounds of the cicadas have faded and almost disappeared.

My cats, Lucy and Leo, can't find a decent garter snake to play with these days, and the remaining cicadas have skillfully eluded them. The morning dew is heavy and the nights are cooler and night sky clearer. Soon the leaves on my October Glory maple will begin the first stages of turning to a blazing maroon, and turn bright red in the autumn sunshine, and a fun memory is in my future when I'll be jumping in the leaves with my nine-year-old grandson.

The turning of the Fall season usually turns my thoughts toward the natural cycle of our lives. It makes us more aware of the natural cycle of life, and makes us more appreciative of our elderly parents who are in the Winter of their lives.

We are suddenly more aware of needing to make more memories of this day, aware of the need to tell your friends and family that you love them. If you are as astute toward these

things as I am, Autumn would not be a good time to watch ‘The Lion King’ and listen to the theme song, “The Circle of Life” unless you remove your mascara first. So enough of the Autumn melancholy! Carpe Diem! Tell people you love them and share something funny from a great book you’ve been reading, and laugh ‘til you cry !

Jamesa Reese
(speaking of natural cycles, today is my 64th birthday)

Dear Reader,

Cancer and books? How do they go together? They’re not like a horse and carriage nor are they oil and vinegar!

At this time last year, I was fairly confident I was a cancer survivor. I had lived thirteen years beyond my original diagnosis and treatment, defying the medical opinion regarding my longevity. However, the kick in the gut came at the end of last summer when I was re diagnosed. The doctors said a mutilating surgery (to my face) would slow down the disease, but not stop it, because they couldn’t follow the tumors into my brain without killing me.

My world stopped. Of course part of me knew that I was going to die: we all die. But suddenly I was preparing to die before Easter!

Cancer and books? Sitting down with a book was the only way I could slow down my fears and find some peace in the frenzy of doctors’ appointments, cross country travel for second opinions and family/friends upset. So I read! It was a vast variety of books --- from Deepak Chopra’s BUDDHA to STILL ALICE by Lisa Genova to Toni Morrison’s BELOVED. When I emerged from the dozens of books I read, and from chemotherapy and radiation, the follow up MRI showed no tumors anywhere! Within the covers of others’ stories, and the help of modern medicine, the reality of my life changed. It didn’t matter if people and circumstances were fictional, they became part of me. I realized that how I experience life is what creates the tale of who I am and why I am here. My personal story receded from the abyss back into perspective: we all live until we die. It’s how we do it that matters!

Cancer and books? They are woven together by the beauty of words and the human imagination. I want the magic of books to be part of all of my life, forever, regardless of my longevity or personal circumstance. Laughter. Tears. Confusion. Awareness. Reading made me part of a bigger universe where I recognized the vast diversity and richness of the human experience. My life story became part of the bigger fabric of all the stories! Books will outlive us all, even as they become part of us.

Dear Reader, carpe diem, book by book!

Ann Cornfield

Dear Reader,

"By the way, did you know Grandma was engaged to someone else before she married Grandpa?"

This is not the kind of thing one usually says as they are walking out the door, but I think my mother meant to say it nonchalantly, even though it bothered her a great deal.

"And she still has the ring!"

It was a story my mother and two sisters had never heard before, but somehow, sixty years later, it came up in conversation. My grandmother mentioned she had a ring, with a diamond, from before she met my grandfather. She had been engaged to another man, promised to marry him when he returned from the war. Her parents were not happy with the match, since he was a "Catholic!" and they were good Protestants, but the young couple was in love. Sadly, he was killed in a plane crash on a training mission off the coast of Florida. After the funeral, it was this man's brother who introduced my grandparents.

"I just can't believe she never told us this before!" my mother said. "And just so you know, I was never engaged to anyone other than your father."

My mother was astounded that she had never heard this story, but I think that we all have stories that need to be told. The trick is in telling the right story at the right time to the right person. We all know folks on the other end of the spectrum, who just keep talking and talking, until you are sure you have heard everything and you just stop listening.

One of my great-grandmothers spent more than a year, writing down all her life memories. She worked with her children on the project, which would have been quite a feat even for someone who was younger than 95 years old. In the end, they bound and published a 90-page book, filled with wonderful stories and pictures. It is not a great literary work by any means, but it is her voice, and such a family treasure. We all have our own copies, and I keep mine close at hand. It is also close to my heart, a reminder to keep listening, but also to keep telling my own stories.

Thanks, Suzanne! I hope you have a great vacation!

Julie Kuntze

Dear Reader,

Way back in the mid 50's when my husband and I were married college students I clipped a recipe for Marge's Cornmeal Rolls out of the Denver Post newspaper. It was the winning recipe in a contest. I had been making those rolls for forty years when we retired and moved to a small town at the base of a mountain. We lived in a very rural

area and our only neighbors were an elderly couple. She and I got to carrying baked goods back and forth to each other, which eventually turned into a sort of contest. One weekend I took my cornmeal rolls and she commented that they were just like hers. We got to comparing notes and she was the Marge that had invented that recipe and won that contest. Now, talk about a small world! I had been to college and Marge only had an eighth grade education but I cannot tell you how much I learned from her while she was alive. What I had learned from teachers and books Marge learned from life and living. She grew up in a very large family with a sick mother. When she graduated from the eighth grade she was put on the train and sent west to work as a cook's helper on a ranch, which is where she eventually met her husband who was a ranch hand. I always thought if I were to write about an important person in my life it would be as a tribute to Marge. Thank you, Suzanne. for giving me the opportunity to write out my heart.

Dorothy Knott

Dear Reader,

Often my best efforts are swept away in a tide of confusion. Fittingly I tag it "Amelia Bedela Disorder" after the wonderful childrens' books. It begins innocently but then the literal translation gets mucked up in my brain.

Once a woman from a volunteer organization I belonged to asked me if I would *take* squares to a meeting. I said of course, when would she like me to pick them up. There was prolonged silence finally broken with, "I want you to *make* them and then take them to the meeting." Ouch. Willingly I did, but thought why didn't she just ask me to make not just take.

On my way home from work recently, I remembered it was the night of a bridal shower given by some elegant women in a friend's bridge group. The invitation said group gift with a money donation and also bring a little something for the bride's kitchen like a cake mix or wooden spoon along with a favourite recipe. The convenience store provided a whisk. Greeted by the bride who told me to leave everything in the guest room, dutifully I did only to observe beautifully decorated bags with rainbow tissue papers flowing and the recipe card attached with bright coloured ribbons. My recipe was in my purse (Jim Bob's chicken). Fortunately I had put money in the silver bowl for the group gift of a set of gleaming pots and pans. The bride oohed and aahed over the wrapped gifts of silver wine flutes, ornate baking dishes and an elaborate punch bowl set. My bag less whisk lay forlorn on the table.

Hoping I could make a quick, undetected escape I was caught by the bride's Mother who swooped in and asked where my recipe was along with the unspoken question of where was my gift. I dug inside my purse for Jim Bob's card and pointed at the whisk. Dead silence swallowed the room as obvious to this group the "fun" gift should be very grand and wrapped competitively preferably in Mrs. Spelling's wrapping room. Somehow the message didn't reach the same thought process in my brain as theirs.

The nice part of this condition is that even with a massive faux pas I can pass this off as an Amelia moment.

Joan Karlowsky

Dear Reader,

As our first granddaughter turned two...twenty-eight years ago.... Grandpa and I thought a tricycle would be the best birthday present so on a bright Spring morning we set out with parents and Amber to select the gift. She was easy to please and selection didn't take long, but amusing her on the drive home was more difficult. Grandpa asked her to do some counting for him, but she was reluctant to begin, so he started "one,... two, ... three,four" with pauses in between. However, nothing from Amber...he continued "five,... six,... seven..." all the way to "ten". We were all surprised and very amused as she clapped her hands and remarked in her excited little voice "that was very good, Grandpa". (Better to have been there!)

Although Grandpa is gone and Amber's own daughter is a little over one year old this is still a favorite family story for me. One of the biggest joys in life is the spontaneous remarks from little ones....especially Grandchildren.

Mary Neville

Dear Reader,

It was just last week, that my husband and I were setting up a bookcase in our bedroom, to house all my nightly reading material. You see, I can't go to sleep unless I read at least a chapter or two. As I was gathering books from here and there, I came upon one that I hadn't thought about for many years. Instantly, I found myself flooded with memories.

When I was very young, I lived in an old house that my parents rented on the outskirts of Chicago. Some of my first memories are of this house; its white front porch that wrapped all the way around the corner and down the side, the dining room window overlooking a pretty flower garden, and a wonderful back yard swing. However, the house's location was probably its best asset. It was just a few short blocks from the park. This fantastic park was right on the shore of Lake Michigan, with a beautiful beach and an enormous playground that took up an entire block. Also, to my delight, it had an old field house that was converted into a library.

My mother and I spent many hours in that library. I guess you'd call us "regulars" there. It was just one very large room with polished, wooden floors, and a desk in the middle. The walls were towering, from a toddler's perspective, although even the adults needed a ladder to reach the higher shelving. My section was easy to reach though, and I knew where to find all my favorite books. There was Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel or Gladys L. Adshead's The Brownies, which I checked out continually. But, my most

favorite book of all was Angelo the Naughty One. This book spent more time in my house than it did in the library, but I never tired of it.

Unfortunately, there came a time when we decided to move to a new house. This should have been a happy occasion, but I truly loved the park and “my” library. On my final visit there, the librarian said I would be dearly missed, and with a hug, presented me with my very own copy of Angelo the Naughty One. Sixty years later, this is the book that triggered all these fond memories.

Janice Jasieniecki

Dear Reader,

I was at work the other day with my bright, shining, "Hello, let me know if I can help you" smile on my face when I walked a little girl of about four. I said, "My, don't you look pretty today!" She smiled sweetly and looked up at me with her gorgeous brown eyes and said, "Wow. You have big teeth."

Teeth always remind me of the summer when I was ten years old. We were on our way to visit family in the Caribbean. We spent the first night with my aunt and I got to sleep in her library. With so many books, I had to pick one to read that night. Which book did I choose? Well, the one that would make the most sense to read when you are about to spend a couple months at the beach-- *Jaws*!

I have always had a mixed fascination and fear of sharks. When I was five I walked into my parents' room while they were watching a shark documentary and saw a feeding frenzy that both scared and scarred me. I thought sharks were EVERYWHERE--in pools, in bathtubs, in toilets. And, to top it off, sharks took over my dreams. I would wake up exhausted from nights of swimming away from the enormous creatures.

With such a history, what better way to begin a beach vacation than to read the entirety of *Jaws*? At age 10. In the darkness of night. It was TERRIFYING. Yet somehow I managed to go to the beach everyday. Did I swim? Now *that's* debatable. If you count climbing up my mom's back every time a piece of seaweed brushed against my leg or screaming at the top of my lungs whenever one of my brothers would sneak up on me underwater, well then, yes, I did swim.

But really, I need not have worried. Now I know that if an enormous, man eating shark were to ever open his mouth in an attempt to devour me, all I would have to do is flash my "Hello, Let me know if I can help you" smile at him and he will be sure to see that my teeth are WAY bigger than his and he will quickly swim away. Thank God I know that now.

Nicole Powers

Dear Reader,

One event in my life profoundly changed my attitude about delayed gratification. I no longer let it apply to everything I want to do just for fun.

I was a federal civil servant and spent the last six years of my career working at the Pentagon. I thoroughly enjoyed working for the Army and my wonderful boss, a female Major General. When she was promoted and scheduled to transfer, many people encouraged me to apply for a promotion: a position on the Joint Staff, still in the Pentagon. I was not sure I wanted a promotion to an unknown entity and delayed applying until the last day possible. I was surprised when called for an interview and astounded when selected. And very apprehensive. I delayed accepting until just before the deadline.

About a year later, a young woman who had sat next to me in our van pool to and from work for several years, Molly, told me she had just moved into my newly-renovated former office. She invited me to meet her there at 11:30, get "the tour," then go to lunch together at the new food court close by. It was 9/11/2001.

Shortly after 9:30 that morning, terrorists crashed a plane into the Pentagon on the opposite side of the building from where I was working. All women were ordered to evacuate. The next day, on my way in, I saw the damaged side of the Pentagon for the first time and realized that the plane had hit directly into the window near where I used to sit.

One lesson from that experience: Life is shorter than we expect and it is fuller when you don't delay enjoying it. So ... I did not put off retiring, moving to Florida, buying a boat, or visiting my grandchildren whenever I missed them.

Current plans: a cruise as soon as I get back to Florida from visiting my two oldest grandchildren. Many of my Dear Reader book clubs selections are on my Kindle2, so easy to take with me.

It's really wonderful reading with friends.

Sincerely,
Darlene Perry

Dear Reader,

I have always been fascinated by time travel. Is it possible? Or is it just something that is in the imagination and in sci-fi movies? When watching movies and reading books about it, thousands of questions pop into my head...like, could you really go back in time, return earlier than you left and meet yourself? If you changed history, would you return to different circumstances before you left? And would you remember your previous life that no longer existed once you returned? I can just spin my brain out of control trying to

figure it all out. So if I could, where or when would I go? Back to college and get a higher degree? Or back to the major moments in my life, getting married, adopting our precious twins, or giving birth to our miracle baby? All those were wonderful times that I would love to relive and to experience the emotions again. But I have decided that I would just go back to a memory, not a specific date. I really don't know if I am thinking of the summer of 1974 or 1976, or if I was 8 or 10 years old. But what I do remember is feeling a tremendous amount of peace and security. We would spend our days at the pool, listening to music and eating egg salad sandwiches, chips, and drinking grape Koolaid while the summer sun shined down on us. Just me, my mom, and my younger sister would spend the whole day doing nothing but just being together. I don't remember specific conversations or even what kind of bathing suits we wore. But, yes, that is where I would go. And from that point on, I would not change one thing of my life. I would want to relive those big moments all over again. As you can see, it isn't the big moments that have made up my life, but it is the small things that happen each day that brings the most joy and peace when remembering.

I hope that I will give my kids the same memories and feelings when reflecting upon their childhood. If, sometime in the future, someone figures out how to travel through time, hopefully my kids will want to return to just spending a day with mom.

Melissa Kim Feagler

Dear Reader,

As she walked into the bedroom I couldn't help but smile. Her hair is short and spiked while her bangs are long and gracefully fall in a curve over her left eye. Her black pants are full of the holes that we cut in them just after purchasing. Her hands are covered with black gloves that expose her fingers while her arms are adorned in various bracelets, arm bands and a watch. When she turned her head, I could see the faintest specks of pink on her black shirt. I quickly realize that it's from the pink spray she used to color her hair.

Here is a girl who travels to the beat of her own drum. In this moment, I don't yell at her to go and change before her first day at a new school. I don't tell her that she looks weird or that she won't make friends if she looks this different. I look into her soft brown eyes and I tell her that she is beautiful. I mean these words with all of my heart.

I can tell she is nervous as we approach the front doors of her new school. She looks at me and I know she is secretly pleading with me not to leave her. I wish I could tell her that I'm nervous too. I am scared that others will look at her and label her. I am afraid that they will take away her individuality.

As I hug her, she whispers in my ear and asks me what she's supposed to say if anyone asks her why she's "emo" or "punk". I whisper back in her ear and I tell her if that happens, she is to look them in the eyes and say "I don't define myself. I am just me." With that, she smiles at me and I know she will be fine. We both will.

Robyn Simaganis

Dear Reader,

This morning on my way to work I listened to the daily question and answer contest on my favorite radio station. The question was: What keeps 10% of women from taking a vacation? There were lots of answers phoned into the radio program. They ranged from family responsibilities to finances, but immediately what popped into my mind was body weight. I didn't call in with my answer, but ultimately the contest was won by someone else calling in with the correct answer – 10% of women cannot or will not wear a bathing suit! The question and answer focused on women, but I think the issue of weight impacts everyone in our society.

I just wanted to cry when I heard the correct answer. First that our society has conditioned us, adults and children regardless of age, that we are valued by our body size; and second that our perception (and others' perception) of our size limits our enjoyment of life. This concept is especially cruel for those among us that have dieted our entire life without positive long-term results. This is true regardless of whether we're trying to lose 10 pounds or a 100 pounds. It just hurts more when you're on the 100 pound or more end of the scale.

I am especially sensitive to this issue because I'm a living breathing example of how common concepts of dieting and exercise doesn't work for everyone, and how the cruel overt and covert judgments of others can be wrong and damaging. One size does not fit all. Fifty years of trying desperately to lose weight by trying every diet I could find and practically living in a gym, resulted in a very obese body that longed to be "normal". Last year, an off-hand comment by my doctor lead the two of us to discover that I had a very simple enzyme deficiency. Why couldn't someone have helped me, and so many others fifty years ago? One small change in my eating habits resulted in a 70 pound weight loss in 6 months! I've got more weight to lose, but I'm still shedding pounds healthfully with no diets, pills, surgery or crazy exercise routines.

My point in writing this morning is to ask my reading friends at the book club around the world to reach out and help that 10% of women in the survey and everyone else that suffers the battle of the bulge, understand that we shouldn't let our perceptions of our body weight keep us from experiencing and enjoying life, and to never give up trying to improve our health. The answers are out there, we just have to continue searching for them even when the search is lonely. Society can be cruel but each of us can make an immediate difference by how we treat each other. I found the magic key and so can others with just a little help from our friends.

Rose Lawrence

Dear Reader,

I have finally succumbed to your pleas about writing a guest column, so I am picking up the pen, or the keyboard in our 21st century world. Nothing comes to mind easily, as you so enthusiastically seem to do every weekday morning. We closet writers envy your ease of expression, but do enjoy your outpourings on every imaginable subject!

So what is the first thing that comes to mind this morning! The birds chirping in a corner outside the laundry room, where they shouldn't be chirping. We have overgrown bushes and shrubbery, not to mention the proliferating live oaks in the front yard which seem to harbor birds galore and of course their "enthusiastic outpourings" on our driveway and walkway, which the noisy lawn sweepers whisk away every Friday. But the rest of the week they do adorn our yard and one of these days, I may receive an angry missive from the housing association warning us about the filthy walkway! I don't know what these birds feed on, being Houston, probably on plenty of pests and bugs! I do throw out left over food beyond the fence, which in all probability they find unappetizing. But they seem to be thriving, not to mention, the rabbits, snakes and umpteen other creatures!

What else crossed my mind this morning - oh yes, I was discussing "cognitive impairment" with my husband over breakfast and telling him about an article in TIME which talked about how learning multiple languages as a child seems to protect one against such an eventuality in one's old age. Growing up in India, you willy nilly learn three or four languages, the mother tongue, the regional language, the medium of instruction in schools and of course the mandatory "second" language in your upper grades, so I am well insulated against any encroachment of Alzheimer's!

Hey Suzanne, look! I almost wrote a column, hurray!

Thank you for reading.

Rowshan Daneshy

Dear Reader,

I looked at him in awe again today. How wonderful and perfect he is. It's amazing how I have something to do with who he is today. My eleven year old son never ceases to amaze me. He's such a unique, special, happy little person. He knows what he wants and tells you exactly how he feels. He even recognizes when I'm having a tough day and knows to tell me to sit down with him to watch a funny show to help me relax. He's reaching his teen years and I can see the changes. He has a little mustache coming in, and he asked for a deodorant because, as he says, he now smells like a man. I can't help but giggle and cry a little. He's growing up so fast right in front of my eyes. He's not my baby anymore.

What a wonderful privilege to be part of his life and transformation into adulthood. Although he still enjoys hanging out with mom, he now likes to spend more time with his

friends, his dad, and his special friend, who he proudly calls his girlfriend. I am not sure she knows she's his girlfriend though.

Parenthood is such an amazing journey. You have this baby whom becomes a little person, then an adult whom we get to guide along the way. I know there's so much more to experience as a parent. He's only eleven, but the years are going by so fast. I know there will be a time when he will move out, go to college, fall in love, choose a career, get married, have children, and so much more. I hope I am able to share those wonderful experiences with him. But for now I will enjoy every moment, every giggle, every smile, every frown, every tear, and every I love you.

Ivy Torres

Dear Reader,

It was a hot and humid summer in 1984 and my mom had just past away a few months earlier. Us ten children missed her very much as it seemed she was never no further then a telephone call away from us, and we would call her if we had something that was bothering us or, to ask her how she was feeling, or how to do something.

I was having trouble on this one old quilt that a dog had chewed and i was trying to replace the chewed of part as i could not get the pieces sewed together right.

I reached over to pick up the phone and was dialing her number when i remembered she died. I put the phone in the cradle and stared at the sewing machine.

The room felt chilly and i felt a hand on my shoulder and two hands held my hands and showed me piece by piece and helped me sew the pieces together so they looked nice and smooth.

When the square was done i turned around and felt a brush on my cheek and i said," Thank you mom." And the room turned back to warm.

Vivian Simone

Dear Reader,

The day i was almost kidnapped. I was ten years old and mom and dad had kept me home from school because i had to have blood drawn for the umpteen millionth time as i had childhood epilepsy. my father was medically retired when i was 9 and so mom and dad both were taking me to my doctors appt I hated to have blood drawn as everyone probably does but not only did i hate it i was a handful when it had to be done due to the fact when i was 4 a nurse was in the process of drawing blood i squeezed her hand and she had a elastic band watch on and when i squeezed her wrist it pinched her there fore she cussed me out. Any-who i had a hard time with blood draws after that traumatic experience. So after my doctors appt my parents decided i was good so they were going to take me to mcdonalds for lunch. when we got to mcdonalds we got out and my mom was walking in front of me and as we entered the resturant mom was asking me what i wanted

to eat when a scruffy looking man was on the phone talking apparently when my mom went to go into the second door which lead into the resturant and the gentleman grabbed my sleeve and i in fright grabbed my moms sleeve in desperation. it was a tug of war match until i finally won . when we got in my mom said what was that all about i said wwwwat . she said why did u pull on my sleeve i said that man tried to grabb mme she said yeah right jess are u telling me a story . I said No. I was prone to making up stories at that age. and she finally believed me and when we looked the man was Gone .

jessica bruins

Dear Reader,

Recently, I called a friend in another state and her sister answered the phone. After stating my message, I gave my name, then spelled it, since it is a bit unusual. Oh, she said, "I know who you are because she speaks of you often. She said you are quite elderly." WHAT? Quite elderly? Me? The dictionary says, "rather old" to define "elderly." So does quite elderly mean, really, really old?

There are all kinds of OLD! I grew up with a friend who was old at sixteen, so prim and proper, she never could even laugh out loud! She would never have laughed so hard she sprayed her milk out her nose like my brothers and I did over some silly joke! I am reasonably sure she never did anything her mama told her not to do. I have no idea why she liked me! Why, I'd be willing to bet, she wore a slip even in hot weather!

On the other hand, let me tell you about my Aunt Beulah. She lived in a nursing home and was the life of the party! She loved to walk outside to enjoy the fresh air and smell the wood fires, in the fall, and notice which trees had begun to change color. The many wild Dogwoods in the area were usually among the first to wave their deep red leaves at her. Fortunately, the weather was fairly moderate where she lived. The last time I visited her, she told me about the fall bazaar and showed me all the items she had made, the exquisite sewing with tiny stitches, the beautifully knitted sweater etc. She was chairwoman so had been busy, most recently, with the hundred details that job required. She cleaned her own room because she said the maids had enough to do. Yes, in years, I suppose she was elderly, or even quite elderly. She had been visited by the governor and had her picture in the paper on her 102nd birthday.

OK I am old, even elderly at 75 plus years but I am not ready for QUITE ELDERLY. Thank you very much!

Elva Thompson

Dear Reader,

September always makes me sad. I live in a Northern climate, where the joke is that there are 4 seasons: early winter, winter, late winter and Mosquitoes. Truly, it's not always that

bad, but we routinely have frost as late as June, and as early as September, so summer is precious. Even though September can be one of the nicest months, it signals the beginning of the end of those few glorious days. Today it's 27C (84F), and the forecast for the Labor Day weekend is for overnight lows of 5C (about 40F). My poor tomatoes haven't even had a chance to ripen, and now they're at risk of freezing!

And, the days are getting shorter too. When I leave my house to catch the bus at 6:15 am, the sky is now just showing that rosy glow that tells me the sun is on its way. But I know that before too long, I'll be standing at that bus stop in the dark. And, not long after that, I'll be coming home in the dark too! What's a girl to do?

This is where I really have to work on my internal dialogue. You know, that running conversation we have with ourselves inside our heads. Mine usually goes like this: "Oh, I hate winter. It's going to be cold, and dark, and it's going to last forever!" "Yeah, and, we'll probably have a really bad spell where it's 40 below for two weeks!" I can keep a negative conversation going indefinitely if I don't interrupt myself... How about, "Well, there are some good things about winter. The snow looks beautiful when the sun shines on it, and the kids love to go sliding. And, remember that Christmas is your favorite holiday!"

So, my September resolution is to resist being a willing participant in that Debbie Downer dialogue, and instead try to be the cheerful one. Wish me luck!

Terri Crockett

Dear Reader,

It was such a special day, it was like a gift. My husband and I were taking my parents for a drive in the minivan, on a beautiful October day in 1998. It was the day when autumn leaves were at their peak, so I suggested we go to the nursing home and pick up my parents for a drive. They had been confined to a nursing home since June - my mother because of a cerebral hemorrhage, and my dad due to Parkinson's disease. It wasn't easy to take them on outings - it required some planning, and assistance from the staff at the home, but we did it, and off we went. The air was crisp and invigorating, and something just seemed to click in both of them. My mother, who couldn't focus her eyes well enough any more to read, was able to read something on a truck next to us in traffic. They both seemed to enjoy the lovely, colorful trees, and the bright sunshine. Mom made a few comments, but my dad was his usual, quiet self. Speech was especially difficult for him, but he was a thinker, and sometimes he would "save up" his words for something special. Towards the end of our drive, we were going down Main Street in our quaint downtown area, when my dad came out with one of his rare sentences. We were passing a spot where my younger daughter, Hannah, had had her foot run over by a car two years before that, at the age of 5. Of course, we had told my parents all about it at the time, when they were still both living at home in Minnesota, but hadn't mentioned it for quite some time. (Although quite traumatic, Hannah fully recovered, suffering only surface wounds and bruising, and no broken bones.) My dad must have been thinking about

Hannah's accident as he was carefully scanning the street scene. When we got to the spot, he said, "This is the site of a terrible tragedy." It had broken his heart to hear of his little granddaughter being hurt, and had not forgotten. That was all he said, but it was enough. And it was a gift.

Chris Hudson

Dear Reader,

Borrowed Cat

I have thoroughly enjoyed your cat stories, Suzanne. Our cats, Mattie and Richard, also brought us great joy. After their passing, we decided not to get a replacement. About the same time, our neighbor acquired a kitten, "Buttons." Since our neighbor had done "cat-sitting" for us, we reciprocated. Now, Buttons comes to visit regularly, even when "mom" is home, so we have all of the advantages of a pet, with none of the responsibilities or costs.

Mary Louise Lyman

Dear Reader,

She was about 6 weeks old when we adopted her from the local Humane Society. She was part Beagle and "something" else. She yipped and cried all the way home in her crate and I was in love before we turned onto our street. Because of her coloring we named her Cinnamon but it soon became shortened to Cinny. After only 1 week she became sick and was diagnosed with Parvo which is often fatal. The vet made no promises but said he would do his best to save her. My husband was thinking we've only had her a week, surely we aren't that attached to her yet. But one look at me told him that money was no object and yes, we would do whatever it took to give her a chance at life. She survived and thrived for 16 of her 17 years.

She greeted us with smiles and wagging body when we came home, sat next to us when we ate waiting for some morsel to make its way to her mouth or the floor, she chased rabbits when she got the chance and made friends with everyone who came into our home. A favorite game was stalking and attacking her toys. She loved sunning herself to the point of panting on the hottest days of summer. She greeted our son with a welcome that could be heard near and far when he came home from college for weekend visits. She loved her family unconditionally with everything she had.

August 3, 2009 found us having to find a way to say goodbye to Cinny. Her quality of life was unacceptable and she had looked at me the night before as I sat trying to comfort her as if to say, please let me go. Seventeen years was a long time and yet not enough all at the same time. I look forward to seeing her again at the Rainbow Bridge where it is said that our pets wait for us at Heaven's gate.

Sharon Backs

Dear Reader,

Suzanne,

Only is not a synonym for lonely.

I may have been an only child growing up (and still am) but I was not a lonely child. For a few years, toward the end of the Vietnam War, we lived in Okinawa where my father was stationed in the Air Force. I was surrounded by other children and by many loving adults. We lived off base in a tiny village where I was the object of much curiosity because of my blonde hair.

Even my banana-stealing rampage at age two didn't deter the locals from showering me with gifts and from touching my blonde head.

Shortly after leaving the military, my parents decided that the Hippie lifestyle was more to their liking and I was whisked away to live on a commune somewhere deep within the borders of West Virginia. There were no children within a five-mile radius. If I wanted to see kids my age, I walked and walked and walked and walked. There weren't any prearranged playdates and certainly no after-school activities (especially in winter when the snow was piled as high as the door). My best friends were the pack of dogs living on the farm (Siddhartha and Barrow were two of my favorites). Many days, I'd pack a pile of books, a blanket, and food in a backpack and take off with the dogs to wander until I found a new meadow where I could literally read until the cows came home! At dusk, the dogs would help me find my way back home. Bilbo and Frodo Baggins were great friends as was Mary Poppins and Peter Pan.

Growing up, my days were filled with nature and sunshine, the nights with music and laughter. I didn't have a television but I did have music, books, and the undivided attention of my parents and their friends. I read, painted, played, and gardened.

When I tell people that I'm an only child, I can see "The Look" pass over their face. It's the look of pity mixed with sorrow. And nine times out of ten the person I am talking to will ask if I was lonely. I reply that being an only means that I'm a one-of-a-kind original and that being an only is not synonymous with being lonely!

Loree Sichelstiel

Dear Reader,

It's a beautiful sunny day in September, and after a trip to the local farmer's market yesterday, I am canning peaches. They sat on my counter for a day because they weren't

quite ready - a little too firm. The best peaches are the kind that give slightly when you squeeze them, and the juices run down your chin when you bite into them. Nothing speaks to me of summer like a fresh, ripe, juicy peach. I made two batches of jam from the ones that were ready, and left the rest on my kitchen island to ripen some more.

We came home from visiting my in-laws today, and there they were, waiting for me - just right, making the kitchen smell like a peach orchard. My children & I set to work - scalding them in boiling water to get the skins off, peeling, slicing, soaking in citric acid, adding syrup, and processing. Whew!! I put a DVD in for the kids to watch, which gives them something to take their minds off the seemingly endless peeling and slicing. It really does help the time pass faster.

Hours later there are rows of gleaming jars standing like sentinels on the island. My feet are sore, and the kids are in bed, but we have our peaches done. Is it a lot of work? Oh, yes. But we get so much more out of it than just fruit to eat this winter. There are life lessons in canning, Reader! Really, you say - sounds like it would be easier to go to Costco and just buy a case of peaches.

Believe me, there are times during the canning when the fruit seems to multiply like rabbits, or you swear someone is re-filling the basket because there are yet MORE peaches. But after it is all done, it is worth the time & effort for so many reasons.

I like that my children are learning to stick with a job, and accomplish a task. They learn that work done with others is more fun than going it alone. I am passing on my heritage - the moms in my family have canned for generations, and I hope my children will too.

And best of all, on that blustery, cold, snowy February day, we enjoy a bit of summer sunshine.

Cherub Beard

Dear Reader,

Can you help me, please?

We have all used that question at one time or another in our lives when we want directions to find something. This question took on a whole new meaning for me in March of this year.

A lone, tired and confused I asked this question of a young man hoping he would help me find my way home. I had walked for hours and couldn't find my street. As it turned out I could have walked in circles for days and not find my street because I was in another city.

How I got there remains a puzzle to this day. The assumption is I took a bus there. I was diagnosed with Global Amnesia. There are a lot of words that strike fear in our hearts but Amnesia has tops my list. I didn't know who I was, where I lived, or if I had family. I

remembered nothing except that I woke up on a beach around seven o'clock in the evening. Events and things about my life prior to that point were gone. Seven months later some of the memories have returned but I have no answers as to what cause the Amnesia. The doctor's are stumped. I had no injuries, no traumas, blood work and other tests were normal.

The only retention I had was my ability to communicate. Amnesia has made me look at our wonderful, beautiful world with all its imperfections through totally different eyes. I have had to relearn and am still relearning things we all take for granted. I had and have cravings for different foods but can't tell you what I want. I look at things and have to try to write a description of what I'm looking at so I can ask someone later if I'm alone.

I watch small children, who are learning their world for the first time, asking frustrated parents zillions of questions. I can relate to the child's frustration at not knowing what it is they are asking about.

The next time your child(ren) inundate you with the proverbial "why" think about what you would do as an adult who should know the answers but you don't. Learn to be patient with your child

Peggy Rathier

Dear Reader,

Stop for a second, and visualize the face of a Happy Baby. Look at that beaming, radiating smile. This baby is enjoying the present moment to the fullest. I have a 14 month old baby boy, Keshav. I cherish each moment I spend with him. Watching him grow, taught me some wonderful lessons. I would like to share three salient lessons I learned from him.

Explore your favorite things:

One day I called up my brother, and said, "I nick named my son as 'Keshav Explorer'". "Keshav Explorer?". The way my brother stressed "Explorer" conveyed the quizzical expression why I choose that name. With a chuckle, I said, "Yeah, Explorer!. We use internet explorer to search for our favorite things on web; windows explorer to retrieve the files we saved. Likewise, Keshav goes around hunting for some cool looking, tiny, cuddly articles. He even found the items I haven't seen for a while – my favorite smiley book-marker, DVD remote, my special two-sided yellow-pinky marker pen... That's why I named him 'Keshav Explorer!'

Be Light Hearted:

There are moments when I scold Keshav, when he pulls TV cable wires, takes off DVD from DVD player. I say "No" and bring him off from doing these. He goes back and tries to do the same. I get upset, and scream "No! Stop doing it Keshav". With the most cherubic expression, he comes to me gesturing me to hold him. His cool, calm behavior makes me wonder how poised he is as if nothing can hurt him. May be its just the babies

way. They don't carry over hurt, pain, or sadness. Boy! He is teaching me a lesson. Not to get upset, and to be light-hearted.

Set no limits:

How often we hear, "I gave up learning swimming". "I don't have skills or talents to be a sales person". Many more excuses. Have you seen a baby who gave up learning to walk? Why? Babies know no limits. They don't know that they cannot do it. And so they do it. They always keep reaching out above and beyond. I saw Keshav falling down galore times. It doesn't stop him. He gets up, and gets going. Watching him, I realize that the only limits we have are the limits we set.

Aruna Ankem

Dear Reader,

"You're too fat to do anything in life."

Eight words, eight tiny words that hurt worse than a finger with a paper cut dipped in a container of lemon juice and salt. What could hurt worse than someone calling you fat could? The only thing I can think of is the words coming from the person in the mirror.

During middle school I always thought, you lose five pounds and you'll be popular. It would play over and over in my head every morning on my way to school but those pounds just kept hanging on.

By the time I had reached my senior year of high school I was forty pounds overweight and nowhere close to losing them. The summer before my first year of college was the summer of obsession, I became obsessed with eating healthy and exercising and it worked! The weight began to fall off, with each pound I would think, okay only five more to go. I looked great on the outside, but on the inside I was still fat.

I managed to keep the freshmen 15 off but I couldn't stop thinking about losing more and more weight. All that hard work came to a halt the summer before my sophomore year, My aunt decided to tell me the treadmill wasn't help me, we had a huge argument and she stormed out. That night I sat down and really thought about what she had said; she was half right, the treadmill wasn't doing me any good emotionally, it was tearing me apart. I began to enjoy not going and working so much and enjoying foods that I liked, not foods I thought I had to like.

Today I'm at a healthy weight and couldn't be happier with how I look. I even enjoy shopping for clothes, something I never had before. I can walk down the sidewalk with my head held high and a piece of cake in my hand, and if I eat something healthy I don't do it to become what everyone else thinks I should be, I do it for me.

Rachael Sanders

Dear Reader,

“Have a nice baby, Diana.” I felt her hand in mine, bird-light and papery-smooth, gently saying goodbye to me, tears brimming in our eyes as we both knew this was our final parting. My beloved grandmother was in the nursing home, quickly declining in health as her eighty-plus years finally caught up with her. I was pregnant with my first child and knew, in that surreal moment, my grandma’s tearful eyes would never gaze upon my baby.

It wasn’t long before I stood in the funeral home greeting family and friends, alternately hearing words of condolence for my grandmother and congratulations on my obvious pregnancy. Grandma had lived a long life, and I was content to know that she was at peace and no longer suffering, my sadness only being for my loss, missing her, missing out on sharing my new baby with her.

Of course, I had many treasures to remember my grandma, some of these being the crocheted and knitted blankets that she made. I learned how to knit and crochet when I first became pregnant, wanting to make things for the new baby. I used many of the old knitting and crochet instruction books that came from Grandma’s collection, learning patterns and reading notations left in the margins in her handwriting. After Grandma passed away, I felt like I still had a connection to her. Reading her notes made me feel like she was talking to me, handing down her knowledge to me so that I could continue creating heirloom treasures.

One day, shortly after her funeral, I was sitting alone, quietly crocheting a blanket. I noticed a scent waft through the air. It was that “Grandma” smell that my sisters and I had talked about so many times. Like a mixture of perfume and Lysol and age, it was always the first thing I smelled when I walked through the door at Grandma’s house, or when I hugged Grandma close and she held on for those extra few seconds. Now I smelled her again, and I knew that she had come back to give me that extra hug, reassuring me that she was still around, watching me carry on in her tradition....and yes, she would see my first baby after all.

Diana Zilly

Dear Reader,

It's All About Perspective

My days are long. Keeping a house clean, entertaining a 3 year old, toting a 3 month old, dishes, dinner, errands, the list of thongs to get done goes on and on. I find many days that I look at my to-do list and wonder how many days it's going to take me to get it all done. And how many things I'll be doing over again as soon as I'm done - those pesky dishes just don't ever seem to clean themselves. But I'm make my lists and plug along feeling like a failure each night when I see how few things I have checked off.

And then I realized the other day it is all about perspective so I have a new plan. No more to-do lists for me I am now writing "Did Today" lists. I am going to write down all my accomplishments throughout the day to look at every evening. I am going to count sitting on the floor for an hour trying to teach my son how to play Go Fish. Watching him giggle uncontrollably every time he says, "Go Fish Mommy" is definitely an accomplishment for the day. One that my to-do lists took away because I was so busy trying to complete the next task on my list, I forgot to enjoy what I have. A beautiful life with a wonderful husband and great kids. I am blessed beyond measure.

So what if the dishes don't get cleaned one day. In 20 years I won't remember that but I will remember playing Peek-a-boo with my little girl, tickling her toes, making her grin, and seeing her eyes light up when she looks at me. That is definitely an accomplishment.

So as of today I am throwing out my to do list and starting my "Did Today" list.

Did Today

1) Looked my fear in the face and laughed at it. Wrote a Dear Reader Column because I've always wanted to try. Yay Me!

Mary Lou Hart

Dear Reader,

What a family really means is truly embodied by the Franks whom we will never know except through literature and theatre. Twenty-five years ago I had the incredible opportunity to portray Mrs. Frank in a community theatre production of "Diary of Anne Frank". Most of us had never had a major role before that. What we lacked in experience, we made up for in enthusiasm and spirit. Although our German accents faded in and out, our sincerity shone through. There was a chemistry among us unequalled in many professional presentations. The reviewers weren't too impressed with our performance, but the audiences loved us. Some even asked for our autographs. We ended each show with a blackout and the sounds of the Nazis breaking down the door with Anne's voice over all declaring, "I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are really good at heart". When the lights came up, instead of a regular curtain call, we all slowly entered holding a photograph of our character with the concentration camp and date of their death stamped across the front.

Every night there was a hush by an audience unsure what to do. What a powerful message for them and for us that I remember to this day.

Kathy Vogel

Dear Reader,

Sometimes, when I was growing up, my mom didn't gift-wrap an awkwardly shaped or extra large birthday present. Instead she hid it, and the birthday girl would discover it at the end of a multi-clued treasure hunt. Even if it wasn't my birthday, a treasure hunt was still special. I might help make up and hide the clues that ultimately led to the present. Or I would be as much in the dark as the birthday sister, as we eagerly rushed from clue to clue.

My mom and I are currently working on another treasure hunt. Over the years my parents have collected beautiful antiques, paintings by artists my mom admired or knew, and family heirlooms. Several years ago, my mom started an inventory of these items, describing when and where they were acquired or which ancestor had owned them. My dad photographed the artwork, but nothing else, and never "married" the photos with the words. Earlier this year, frustrated that my retired parents weren't inspired to finish this project, I volunteered to do so.

I didn't realize the effort that this modern-day treasure hunt would take. I still have lot of photos to take, a time-consuming process since some items have been moved from the location the inventory indicates. Then I have to match each photo to its written "clue." I've wondered more than once why I'm doing this. Will anyone care about this detailed inventory?

Perhaps, though, the real value of the project isn't the completed list of words and pictures. My mom and I have spent hours roaming through her house, finding the paintings, boxes, dishes and books on my list of clues. I've learned that the whipped cream compote we used when my mom baked chocolate soufflés belonged to her great grandmother, that my mom owns but never wore until recently an engraved pendant watch her grandmother received when she was a young girl, that my dad made that box in my parent's bedroom in woodworking class, and that my dad's mom and the Lutheran's Ladies Aid sold those exquisite, handmade quilts for \$20.

So my mom and I aren't racing from room to room searching for clues like my sisters and I did on those long-ago treasure hunts. But I think we're having just as much fun.

Carol Dirks

Dear Reader,

Writing? No. Drawing? No, definitely not. Cross those out. Scribbling. Yeah! That's what I like to do. Writing is far too formal for me. First, it has to be all neat and such, and then you have to worry about getting just the exact right words. And, how often do we actually think a complete thought? Too much effort. Scribbling is way better.

Now, some of my scribbles may take on the form of a poem, or a story. Others, well, they just look like a string of thoughts put down one after the other, with plenty of scratch

marks in between. You might call it 'stream of conscious.' I call it scribbling. It can be relaxing, or time wasting. Or, sometimes, award winning.

Yeah, that's how I got my only award for writing. An hour and a half of random thoughts, with a half hour to type them and do just a teeny bit of editing. And it got me second place. Not bad. I didn't expect to get anything out of it. Just kinda submitted it because I thought I might've had something that worked.

I don't really expect to get anything out of this either, but I'm having fun scribbling. And, if my story scribbles ever get developed enough, maybe I'll send them to someone, on the off chance that they see some potential in them.

But, life is too short to worry about what somebody else thinks of my scribbling. Or what I'm wearing, or whatever else. I like to live my life, my way. That's why I scribble. And take minesweeper breaks to see how long I can go before I blow myself up. Blip, blip, blip, BOOM. Oh well. Guess I didn't make it very far that time.

I'd say I've gone pretty far in life though. Graduating college I had a great plan for my life. Only a few months later, the ex-fiancé put a huge bump in the road, and threw my dream life into the ditch. But, I crawled out, found a new road, and I'm better for it.

Through it all, scribbling is there. Letting me pour out my heart, my thoughts, or stretch my imagination. Scribbling has always been a true friend. And so I say 'Thanks.'

Kate Endres

Dear Reader,

We don't realize how precious our lives are until something life-altering takes place. This past Christmas my life changed dramatically.

I have had kidney disease for five years and until the summer of 2008, it was stable. Suddenly, in the fall, it took a turn for the worse and I found myself in the hospital during Christmas. I was there for about two weeks and now my life revolves around dialysis three days a week for three and a half hours.

At first, I was devastated. I was very depressed and didn't want to even leave the house except for dialysis. Then I started talking to some of the other patients. Some of them have diabetes, others have cancer. Still others have difficulty walking.

What I came to realize is that no matter how bad you think your own situation is, there is someone else who is worse than you, and they don't seem to let it get them down. I am also truly blessed to have a wonderful husband and daughter who have helped and supported me in many ways. I thank God every day.

Claudia Miluso

Dear Reader,

Famous Last Words

“This is the last one, 4 is really more than what we can afford to care for.” Oh, those famous last words spoken and then eaten with just a dash of honey to make it easier to swallow. That is exactly what I said to my husband about taking in another stray cat that looked so malnourished his ribs protruded like a breastplate. But oh, those missed opportunities when we don’t take risks, in life and in love.

Shadow is the name given to our new addition to the family because he was just that to his cohort, Midnight. Both black cats, but that is where the physical similarities end, they are best buddies and partners in crime. What one doesn’t think of the other does. And if they are both in the same room at the same time, look out! There is sure to be a “party” to break out and the laughs will soon ensue. I’m sure if they were children (which in some people’s eyes they are exactly that), they would be labeled as the class clowns and have a note sent home with them everyday from their teacher. The throw-downs they put on each other would make any wrestler with the WWF jealous. Hum, maybe we could film these little episodes and market the moves to trainers looking for the next big promotional stunt!

I often think of what would have happened to Shadow had he not “adopted” us when he did. Would he be another casualty of over-breeding, not enough food and care when the going got tough? And then I think, where would I be without the unwanted one, what would my life have been like? The missed laughter, joy at the simplest things, unconditional love passed both ways. When we open our homes, our hearts, our lives to uncertainties, there is the likelihood of giving more than we get in return. But how many times do we worry about something that never really comes about and the missed opportunities for that pure, unadulterated joy that comes from sharing and spending time with someone, whether they are God’s two or four legged creatures?

Jean Warnberg

Dear Reader,

“Chugga chugga choo choo! Mom will you please pull our little train to the other side of the mountain,” begged my children. With a few cracks and pops of the knees I was down on all fours. My girls giggled at the sight of me straining to pull the choo choo blanket they were riding. I couldn’t resist the pleas and the drama “Yes, I think I can. I think I can!”

There’s a special place in my house an escape, a place where the door to imagination and storytelling is always open. It’s a space especially designed for mom and dad, no toys or distractions, with the exception of occasional children. My husband and I have been

pleasantly surprised to find our children enjoy this space as much as we do. They cast a spell and magically transform a quiet solitude into their stories. Once upon a time my cherished space served as a castle filled with cardboard box cut outs and my beautiful little princesses. Long long ago, it was the first time I had seen my lovely red loveseat turn into a delicious hillside of green grass. You wouldn't believe it or maybe you would, but creeping around as goats and a mean old troll is just as exciting as the glam of royalty. The stories are limitless. My peaceful place has been taken over by flashlight disco stars and stranded hula dancers.

The vision I had for the space resembled a library room, the kind of library where courteous patrons adhere to the signs posted, "Quiet Please." I've come to accept that our library is not a typical one. In fact, I'm happy to listen to my children embrace the stories read to them. Many of those stories take me back to the days I spent sitting in my mother's lap amused as she took on the voices of different characters. Maybe signs in libraries should say, "WARNING! Reading material could result in strange side effects. Proceed with caution."

And so I escape to our library room, a special place where anyone and/or anything that enters becomes a possibility.

Catherine Kittell

Dear Reader,

On arriving in Kansas City for a one-week visit with my daughter and her family, she noticed my new glasses right away. "Boy, Mom," she said. "I really like your glasses. There so cool."

Me, a mother, cool? I thought kids, after reaching a certain age—like eight--never thought their mothers were cool. After all, they're mothers!

The next day I was strapping on my fanny pack with a CD in it. I was planning on listening to a book on CD while I took my walk. My daughter looked at me and rolled her eyes, just like she did when she was a teenager.

She said, "A fanny pack. So much for cool."

And I responded, "You know what's coolest of all? I don't care."

And, that's so true. With age being "cool" isn't important. Nor is what others' think of you. By now you know who you are and that's just fine with you. In fact, it's down right cool.

Jerilyn Kaufman

Dear Reader,

For many years I have gotten up to run before the sun rises. And for the past year, I have had my furry companion, Dude, to run with me. We run rain or shine because this dog's gotta run no matter what the weather. We start out at a walk, and then I ask him, "Dude! Are you ready to run?" He looks over his shoulder at me with a silly grin and then bounds ahead, his joy lighting up the predawn morning like a glass of fresh orange juice lights up a thirsty runner's eyes.

A while ago, I reaped another benefit to getting up before sunrise. As we crested a hill, Venus, the crescent moon, and Jupiter were all in a line. It was breathtakingly gorgeous, and I stopped to walk for a while to enjoy the heavenly view. The three remained visible as the horizon turned a pale pink and the stars were replaced by birdsong. The joy of running that united Dude and me earlier vanished, as I knew he could not feel what I felt in seeing that glorious sky. What a way to begin the day!

Candice Michalik

Dear Reader,

During the rain delay, my son and I grab seats in the concessions area. I sip Diet Pepsi while he drinks root beer and instructs me on the finer points of baseball and rain.

"You'll know the game is ready to start when the pitcher begins warming up," he says. "Pitching is the most difficult thing you can do with your body--it's not natural--no way a pitcher can warm up, stop, then warm up again."

Just then, a voice--"Is this seat taken?" My brother John, with my nephew Jack, just turned six, behind him!

"I'll call Suzanne and Grace!" Soon my sister-in-law and niece are here and we chat until the pitchers do indeed start to warm up.

For all the games my son and I enjoy--we have the Ozzie 13-game plan--we've never before met anybody we know.

I have a thing about coincidences--I refuse to believe that's all they are. So it strikes me that today is the seventh anniversary of my best friend Maggie's death. Could Maggie be saying hello to me through my family?

If you're a cynic, you're cracking up with laughter. But I'm a Pollyanna, determined to find silver linings during rain delays, no matter how hard thunderbolts hammer down on the field. There's bound to be a rainbow afterwards, right?

In fact, I collect coincidences. I was hired for my first professional job in the disability rights field on Tuesday, Sept. 10, 1985; the accident that propelled me towards this career

occurred almost exactly ten years earlier: Tuesday, Sept. 9, 1975. When I was pregnant, my husband and I had no insurance--but I put down a tiny deposit for the natural childbirth wing at the hospital of my choice; I had no idea where the rest of the \$1750 would come from. But I had a surprise phone call--a great aunt had sold family land in Ireland. My cut? \$1750.

Mere chance? Depends on your point of view. For me, these are signs letting me know I'm on the right path, that I'm not alone.

And sure enough, the rain delay ended, the White Sox won, and purple, red, and green fireworks lit up South Side of Chicago skies.

It's so good to read with friends!

Diane O'Neill

Dear Reader,

Okay, I've decided to give Suzanne's writing advice a try. I'm just going to start typing and see what happens. Typing, I've always loved to type. It all started back in the 7th grade in Mrs. Rupp's Typing 101 class. There was something about the sound of multiple typewriters (yes, back then we used electric typewriters with an automatic return) humming along that inspired my 13 year old soul. Maybe it was the thrill of doing well on a timed test or the satisfaction of finishing my typing exercise ahead of the rest of the class. I knew from the first day that the typewriter and I would form a life-long bond.

Well, I'm not in school anymore, and I'm not as easily entertained, but I still have a bond with my keyboard. I've chosen a career where typing is a constant occurrence and I am fulfilled with my choice. I look forward to typing federal grants and e-mail correspondence in a way that most people would think is unnatural. I consider the keyboard my friend. It's always there, just waiting to be used. The feeling of my fingers sailing over the keys is invigorating. Click, click, click ahhh. . . .music to my ears! Hey Suzanne, you were right. I did it, I wrote a column "Suzanne style". No thinking ahead necessary, I just sat down and started typing.

Stephanie Mendenhall

Dear Reader,

To most it was just a dusty road leading from nowhere to nowhere, but to us it was so much more. Through all of our adventures, the old sandy road served as a backdrop to a story that I will never regret.

In the days before my family had machines to bale cotton, the cotton pickers would dump

it into trailers. My dad would let us dig caverns and tunnels in the cotton. We could have been smothered since the tunnels could easily collapse when our mobile home was jostled by my siblings' antics. My dad probably had to dodge a frying pan every time we came home from such an excursion.

We started a club called the Snake-Hunters, although I screamed "help! 'nake, 'nake!" the first time I saw one. We searched under rocks for clues and recorded our findings. We never discovered treasure, but we found a few sandstorms and plenty of mischief. We would play "Egyptian Mummy" on top of the cotton bales. One of us would be the mummy while the others would try to rob the tomb, and naturally the mummy would be resurrected. At least one of the thieves would then be tossed into the pit of doom, which, to a realist, would resemble one child being thrown by another child from a cotton bale onto the dirt road beneath.

After an ice storm, the pecan orchard along one side of the road stopped producing. My father had them destroyed, so he could plant something more productive. Between the pushing and the burning, some of the best pirate adventures took place. My sister was home from college, and she needed a break from trying to be an adult. We would sail across the seas guiding the ship with a steering wheel of tree roots. I never minded the swabbing or walking the plank as long as I could climb to the top of the mast and see forever.

Remembering all these things is like resurrecting memories long hidden away in the tombs of my mind, but instead of coming to haunt, they come to teach and bless. The road taught me who I am and who I want to be. I hope my children have something that will give them the same experiences, danger and all.

Lindsay Dalton

Dear Reader,

I remember in my mid twenties standing before my coworkers, all of whom were much older than myself, puffing up my chest, proclaiming that I would never color my hair. I would be proud of my gray locks. I expected to be much older than the ripe old age of thirty-five when my hair began its inevitable turn to the gray side. Everyone tells me they can't see they gray between all the light brown and blond highlights. I have much trouble believing them. The gray ones are out of control and spring out indiscriminately. I keep hoping they will give me more body, but they are simply lightning bolts shooting out of my head. I look more like Medusa each passing day. Frankly, it's making me feel more like her too.

I have had a long history of hair issues. My younger sister was the one blessed with thick, long tresses of strawberry blond hair. She always was the pretty one. I was cursed with dishwater blond hair. How can dishwater ever be complimentary? Not only was it the color of dirty, soapy water it was as straight as sticks. I spent many a sleepless night

tossing and turning trying to get comfortable in my pink spongy rollers, desperate for curl and bounce.

You may think all this trouble with my hair has made me bitter. On the contrary, I have discovered L'Oreal Natural Instincts hair coloring. I can become a new person everyone 6-8 weeks depending on frequency of washing. My husband would like me to try blue or purple, but I refrain as a respectable member of a respectable neighbor (Besides what would the children think!!). What's next, a nose ring and tattoo?

So I am off to color my hair with L'Oreal Natural Instincts number two, a lovely shade of strawberry blonde. Maybe next month I'll try blue.

Kari Street

Dear Reader,

Ennui 'n Me

A couple of years ago my boss had a word-a-day calendar. He would occasionally hand me a word sometimes as a dig, sometimes for humor. "Officious" is up on my wall to remind me not to be such a know-it-all and to mind my own business. Under that is "orthography: the art of writing words with the proper letters." This is especially funny because he can't tell his 'to' from his 'too'. My favorite word from that year is 'ennui'.

I had just returned from military service in Kosovo. While deployed I had a very rewarding military job and I received tons of support from family, friends, coworkers, and even complete strangers. I was in Kosovo from September of 2002 to April of 2003. While there, the rest of my Army reserve unit went off for the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Thankfully, everyone in my unit returned from both excursions (and many subsequent ones).

I did not experience post traumatic stress disorder. What I experienced was "ennui: a feeling of weariness and dissatisfaction: boredom". I returned to my civilian job. But all the while, inside, I was actually thinking "Huh, really? That's it? That's my big Army deployment experience? No crisis, no last minute rescue, no brave moment of valor, no moment of shining victory. And now I come back to my ho-hum regular life."

Upon learning the word "ennui" perspective clicked in. That's what this was. This vague disappointment and return to the mundane. I was disappointed that things didn't turn out to be as exciting as I might have fancied. I was dissatisfied with my civilian job.

Then I thought, "What am I crazy?! I should be happy with the way things turned out!" It's a good thing that I was able to serve my country. It's a good thing that my team all came back and with no injuries. It's a good thing that I had a good job waiting for my return. It's a blessing.

That's it--Blessings! Blessings, when counted well, always add up to more than those fictitious moments of glamorized glory. For every woulda, shoulda, coulda in my life, I am blessed at least three fold! So to fight the ennui, I now count my blessings.

D. Lynette Forbes-Cardey

Dear Reader,

What is it about rainy days that makes the most sensible people turn into drones? I'll admit, I'm a drone on a rainy day, especially if it is a rainy Monday. I like most people, go to bed at the same time each night: 10 pm. I allow myself 30 minutes to read, or 30 minutes watching the news, which ever the mood allows. I set my alarm for 6:30 and usually have no problem hopping out of bed, unless it is raining.

I hit the snooze button 5 times before my 13 year old daughter snickers" Can't haul it out this morning, huh". It's the tone in her smarty pants voice that does the trick. I'm up and in lighting speed, showered dressed and packing lunches.

Everything is fine, until I hit the door and see the rain. It's beautiful. It has a perfect drizzle, the kind that gets everything wet, no matter what kind of umbrella you have. It hits the ground and bounces back up under the cute trench coat that I had to buy because it was on clearance for \$60.00 at VON MAUR! I knew it was way too short and would never protect my clothes like the nice sensible London Fog hanging in my closet. But the black and white lining was irresistible, and it looked fun and young and these days I need all the help I can get to feel fun and young!

I stepped outside into the rain, I am soaked before I manage to get my car door unlocked and throw my briefcase in the backseat. I wave at my daughter and her friends as they dash to the bus stop, oblivious to the rain, not caring that they will have frizzy hair, and damp hems and tennis shoes all day.

As I travel to work, every person I pass whether in a car or on the street, all have the slightly downturned lips and drone expressions that come from having to bear the rain. The line in Starbucks is silent. No happy chatter or pleasantries, just "give me my coffee" so I can get on with this day.

Of course the parking lot is full, I travel on down the street to the next lot and to my amazement, find a jewel of a spot. As I pull my briefcase out of the backseat, my umbrella gets caught on the door and rips in half! The perfect drizzle has picked up and is now a steady down pour. I give my best attempt at trotting to my building in 3 inch heels. As I skip over the drainage grate, my heel gets caught in one of the small opening! No way am I going to let this heel break off. I dance out of the shoe and attempt to balance on one foot and pull my captured shoe from the mighty steel grip of the grate. Dozens of drones pass me by without offering a helping hand. But I see the pity in their dazed wet faces. I manage to wiggle my heel free and in one felled swoop slip my foot back inside

and land on the other side of the offensive grate. I am thrilled at my unusual athleticism, those Pilates classes are finally paying off.

As I duck inside my building, grateful to have survived the morning ordeal, I look over my shoulder at the unrelenting rain. The clouds are dense, so this will be a soaker day. I'm glad I remembered to pack my lunch, oh wait. Where is my lunch? It's in the car. The car parked all the way down the street, pass the dreaded grate. Shucks. No way am I going back out to the car in this rain. It's going to be a vending machine Monday! Wait where is my purse? Dang! It's in the car! Well, I am already soaked. May as well get it over with. Just as I am about to step out into the rain, the handsome stranger that get's off on the 4th floor is coming inside. "Hi, are you going back out in this mess?" He asks. All I can do is stare at his beautiful hazel eyes, and gleaming white teeth. I managed to stammer " Yes, I forgot my purse and lunch in my car." The handsome stranger hands me his huge black umbrella and says" Take my umbrella, you can drop it off to me latter in room 419." I'm sure my mouth is hanging open as I watch this Adonis walk to the elevator. In the blink of a moment, the drone left my being and I found myself skipping in the rain to my car! The rain smelled so lovely and refreshing! As I danced down the street the rain stopped and the sun began to peek thru the clouds. Just as I reached my car, I saw the most spectacular rainbow forming over the cities skyline! It was a sight to behold! Suddenly all was right with the world! Boy am I glad I bought this cute little raincoat!

Carla Reed

Dear Reader,

My grandparents never were the warm and cuddly type. I cannot recall ever climbing onto one of their laps or going to them for comfort or encouragement. Not only had they lived through the Second World War, but they had experienced a plethora of other difficulties in life. They were a forbidding presence in my young life, but one good thing they did do was to bring me fruit!

When I was a child I always looked forward to Saturday mornings. Of course there were Saturday morning cartoons, but even more than that: I knew my grandparents were coming over. And when my grandparents came, they brought fruit with them.

My grandfather had a garden in his Boise, Idaho backyard. He grew honeydew melons, cantaloupe, watermelon, corn, strawberries and a great number of other vegetables and fruits. Sometimes when they would come, my grandparents would bring one of my grandfather's melons. Other times they would bring strawberries or grapes. When nothing else was in season they would bring bananas; my personal favorite!

If my brother and sister were not careful, I would eat all the fruit by myself. Usually in one sitting! I don't have many happy memories of my grandparents, but I will always fondly remember those Saturday mornings eating fruit!

Teresa Lawrence

Dear Reader,

We have been all attracted to Suzanne's book club because of our love of reading, be it her "Dear Reader" column or her book excerpts.

My love for reading started at an early age and I do believe it was my English teacher who really encouraged me; she had me read out loud in the class everyday when we had our twenty minutes of English lessons. Mother is an avid reader and my daughter enjoys reading a good book every now and then. When she was younger she would compete for every reading contest and could sit for ages and read. Her grandmother sent her a small book "Little Women" she carried the book around, before she could read and she would sit next to me, book upside down, pretending to read.

We are now raising our granddaughter and between the four of us she cannot help but love books. At nineteen months she does not quite yet understands, to sit down and read with us, she is on the go and has a mission in life to keep on moving.

I am going to college, yes on the other side of 50 I decided to get a formal education. In approximately eighteen months I will have my bachelor's degree. Not allowing myself to read anything other than textbooks was making me crabby. That is when I decided my evening time in bed is the special time I save for a good book. I sleep so much better with the memories of the last few sentences on my mind as I go to sleep. Studying is fun and I will probably always be a student, but reading for enjoyment is one of life's pleasures and at times it could also be free.

My "Dear Reader" article is a thank you to Suzanne for starting this wonderful club and a cyber place where we can all share our love of good books.

Loretta Price

Dear Reader,

The warehouse sale was scheduled to start Friday at 10am and I planned ahead to be one of the first customers. There would be handbags in an array of sizes and materials. They are called "healthy back bags", designed to distribute the weight of the contents, making it comfortable to carry.

I arrived early and noticed that everyone else in town had the same idea because parking was scarce. Upon entering the warehouse, I could hear the roar of voices and excitement. There were handbags hanging everywhere, down long aisles. Decisions had to be made, and in a hurry.

I gazed over to the checkout line which was already filling up fast. It looked like a good hour wait. I heard conversations as ladies looked over their purchases, and made remarks aloud to justify their choices. The confusion had begun.

I tried to remain calm. I had prepared in advance and knew exactly I needed. I was not going with my mind but that gut instinct. I had made mistakes in the past and I wasn't making one again.

The pink leather bag drew me closer. Such wonderful soft leather, such a happy color and it smelled great. It silently whispered to me "take me home". And I did. I never gave it a second thought. It felt right.

I was elated. I called a friend as soon as I got home to tell her about my purchase. She screamed "Pink! Have you lost your mind!" Then my husband, said it reminded him of Pepto Bismol.

Could going with my gut have been wrong? With the pink bag slung over my shoulder, I frantically ran to my closet and pulled out clothes and ran to the mirror to see how it looked. They were right. The white T shirt and blue jeans looked great with the pink bag. But everything else didn't work.

Then my mind started to speak, "You know how you hate to change bags everyday to match an outfit." Okay mind, you won.

Back to the warehouse. They allowed me to exchange the pink for classic white! It goes with everything! It's a logical decision. The mind won again! So much for that gut feeling.

And we want to shop for a new car! I'm sweating already...

Marilyn Van Aken

Dear Reader,

Reading? Or knitting? Two favorite pastimes. Which will it be right now? Reading is best for me in solitude. A quiet place in a cozy corner. A captivating title. A favorite author. Trouble is, once I get 'into it' I can't stop. A fifteen-minute reading respite does not work for me because I do not want to leave the story for housework, or cooking, or errands, or even gardening. So usually I have to look for a free morning or afternoon or sleepless night to accommodate this favorite activity!

Knitting, on the other hand, fits into my schedule at a different level. If ten minutes are available to knit a couple of rows in my current project, that's perfect! The 'quietude' that my reading requires is not a prerequisite for knitting. I can listen to my husband or music or the TV and still keep my hands in motion, though quiet afternoons and sleepless nights work for knitting too.

So deciding between my two favorite activities is not as easy as it appears. First, I have to calculate the time frame that is available. Then I have to decide if the book trumps the knitting project, or vice versa. Then is the activity likely to be interrupted, or can I choose

the pausing place? Is there a deadline for the knitting project or is there the freedom to read until I stop? Do you see my dilemma?

So, reading? Or knitting? Which will it be right now? Well, first I have to go to the library and the yarn shop . . .

Karen LaCotte

Dear Reader,

I am a writer by trade. No, not that kind of writer—a TECHNICAL writer. I write software instruction manuals, those books you only open when you cannot figure out how to do something in the application and are busy cursing the documentation because you cannot find what you need and you wonder HOW THEY EXPECT ANYONE TO USE THIS DANG... well, you know what I am talking about.

Hopefully, if you have used my documentation, you did not feel that way. But given today's schedules, there is rarely time to create great documentation, so give the writer a break the next time you get frustrated—they would have loved to have had the time to hone that document and make it a more valuable tool for the user. But I digress, that is not what my column is about at all...

Lately I find myself wanting to do something different. Twenty-five years of writing software documentation has left me bored. If I mention this to anyone, they immediately offer the apparently obvious solution: "You are a writer, write a novel!"

Oh, if only it were that easy! But I have spent my career trying to figure out how to say something in the most concise manner, using as few words as possible, leaving out everything that is not pertinent to the task. That is how you write a technical manual. That is NOT how you write fiction. Fiction requires descriptions to paint you a picture, background information so you invest in the characters; all that extraneous "stuff" that, while not relevant to the plot, is very necessary to keep you turning the pages until the end of the book. I myself skip those parts when I read fiction. I didn't in my early life, but now, my brain screams "irrelevant" and I scan ahead until I find something that seems important to the plot. (And yes, I sometimes finish books thinking I maybe skipped something important, because that ending made no sense whatsoever!)

So, novelist is probably not the answer to my predicament. Can you imagine my version of your favorite mystery? Woman finds body. Woman finds clue 1, clue 2, clue 3. Woman unmasks killer. Police make arrest.

Bet you are eagerly awaiting my next mystery, aren't you?

Laurie Willis

Dear Reader,

What would I say to the person who gave me the only joy my childhood ever had? Where might I have ended up if not for the strength the memory of one perfect summer gave me? How perfect were those summer days that they serve as a benchmark even now? Quite possible the only thing to say would also be the simplest, "Thank you, Aunt Ethel."

My Aunt Ethel was my mother's best friend. As a 10 year old during the summer of 1968, I was trying to make myself invisible to avoid the chaos swirling around me. My 16 year old sister was a mini-skirted rebel. At 23, my brother, who had just returned from Vietnam, seemed a virtual a stranger to me. My mother, so thrilled by his return, didn't think twice when Aunt Ethel invited me to spend the summer with her at the Jersey shore. For the first time someone had time to spend with me, someone was interested in me. Someone asked me what I thought rather than telling me. Early in the morning we would don our bathing suits and go crabbing and fishing in the lagoon. Other times we would float lazily around the channel in gigantic car tubes and then laughingly race back to the dock. Aunt Ethel entertained me in numerous ways but she also taught me to entertain myself. Being a voracious reader, she had stacks of books around her house. One day early in my summer visit she took me to the five and dime store and helped me select something of my own to read. I was hooked on the reading and we made frequent book shopping trips after that, often ending with a stop for hot fudge sundaes.

Along with the books and the ice cream there was the table with the perpetual jigsaw puzzle in progress. I remember her process, always turn over the pieces so the colors show, always search for the corners and the straight edges, and always build the frame first. So many years later I still follow those simple guidelines.

I never did get to say thank you to Aunt Ethel for what was for me the perfect summer. I never got to say thank you for the perfect memory, until now, "Thank you, Aunt Ethel."

Cynthia Fox

Dear Reader,

"Rain, rain, go away,
Come again another day."

This morning I woke to a rainy September day. This isn't really what I was hoping for when I opened my door to take in the wonders of a bright fall morning.

Fall rains aren't the kind of rains that make people smile. No one really wants to frolic or dance in a fall rain. This rain isn't going to bring any spring flowers or make the birds sing, let alone Gene Kelly. There isn't even a fat, smiling sun sitting behind a puffy rain cloud, waiting to burst onto the scene and paint a beautiful rainbow across the sky.

No, it is now fall and rain in this season is a serious bummer. September rain is cold on an already crisp day. It makes the sky dark and brooding. There isn't really any differentiating between dawn, noon, or dusk on a day like today. It's pretty much the kind of day that makes most people want to crawl back under the covers and wait for spring.

However, it's a weekday and that means work for me. I am certain that my arch nemesis, the cold drizzle/sometimes torrential downpour, will ensure that I arrive to work in a state of soggy disrepair. My umbrella and rain coat are no match for this master of drench-ery.

On a day like this, I wish I could stay home and look at the rain from the dry side of a window. If this were the case, I would look out upon it fondly and welcome its gentle hypnotizing patter from the refuge of my warm, dry home. I might even curl up in a soft chair with a good book and a steaming mug. Oh, if only wishes really did come true. Alas, my dreams for staying in are not being fulfilled and I'm left wishing that darn rain would just go away and come again another day.

Janet Fouse

Dear Reader,

When I woke up this morning, the phrase "27 Petals and a Kick" lingered in my mind, the last vestiges of a dream. Wow. I first heard that phrase five years ago in the elementary school parking lot.

My two kids were riding their bicycles in the lot and laughing because it felt good. I knew this was a number nine moment. My lucky number is nine and whenever I want to remember something special, I linger on the moment, count to nine and store the image in my memory. This was a good one. I then threw back my head to feel the warmth of the sun and forgot to worry my usual worries. "Mom," one of them yelled. My moment was gone and I smiled, the smile moms smile when they don't really want to smile but smile so their children don't know that they don't want to smile. I looked over at my son who had ditched his bicycle and was now crouched in front of a flowering plant. "27 petals, I counted 27 petals!" I walked over to him, and smiled at the seemingly fragile white petals on this particular flower that he had chosen over all others. He nodded as if to say,

"I'm right, aren't I?"

"Let's see," I said and counted each petal, never realizing before how perfect an individual petal truly is. As I turned to say he was right, my daughter who had drifted over to us, swiftly kicked an abandoned tennis ball. "27 petals and a kick!" she shouted.

I started to laugh. It was such an unusual phrase and I wrote it down somewhere, hadn't I? "27 Petals and a Kick." Five years later my subconscious mind is trying to get me to smile again. And trying to kick some sense into me. Barbara, it's saying, stop worrying so much, start doing already and never, ever forget to count the petals along the way. It looks like the sun is out. And it's going to be a good day.

Barbara Gilchrist

Dear Reader,

For a variety of stereotypical and classic reasons, I have managed to suppress my emotions for most of my 53 years. For brief periods of hormonal insanity during menarche and menopause, I have been able to break out of my prison of confined emotions. What a prison break it has been!

When I was 12, I screamed "I HATE you, I HATE you, I HATE you!", kicked a parent, and even ran away, canceling out years of good behavior. After the hormones calmed, I went back to my placid self for 30 long years.

Then, after 27 years of behaving myself in marriage confrontations, my imprisoned hormones were again freed. I managed to fiercely growl "Back off!", spit in his face, and knee him ever so gently yet message-sendingly where it hurts. People who know me would never believe me capable of such a heroic reaction. It felt freeing. I felt none of those tight-chested, stomach churning, throat-burning feelings I had had during our previous one-sided confrontations. There has been no bullying since.

Just a few days ago, though, I felt the prison bars start to come down again. My mother called me "Little Missy" when I protested one of the distortions of truth that my ex-husband had fed her. I said nothing. I quietly slipped back into my orange pantsuit, onto my hard cot next to my stainless steel toilet, slid back into my pleasant smile, my acquiescence, my M.O. that is so familiar and comfortable.

Part of me, though -- a small, sublimated part -- wants to fight those bars coming down with all my strength, holding on desperately to the wild freedom of my diminishing menopausal rage.

Jennifer Mattson

Dear Reader,

Everything is a story with me. I kept putting off entering the annual Write a Dear Reader Contest because I couldn't decide which story to tell. But yesterday, I received my Tom Bradley book as a contest winner and the thrill of holding an unread book hit me again. That thrill took me back to my first days of reading.

I couldn't wait to start kindergarten and learn to read. As luck had it, I started kindergarten in 1962 and the thought was "children's eyes are not developed enough for reading." So I had to wait until first grade for Dick, Jane, Sally, and Spot to fill my life with simple adventures and escapades. I usually finished the book before our class was halfway through it. That was my secret.

In third grade, my mother took my sister and me to our public library for our first library card. A very important day in my life! We were only allowed three books for the two week check out period. I carefully "stretched" out my reading so I would not be done too many days before the due date.

My greatest fear as I was growing up was that our small town library would "run out of" new books for me to read. I read any type of book, fiction or nonfiction although my favorite was the detective genre. In college, I took an English course titled "Detective Fiction". I felt I was cheating to obtain a grade because I enjoyed it so much ... and I had already read all the required reading.

As I mentioned before, I became a "secret" reader at an early age. I read text book chapters that were not required in classes throughout high school and college. Just a few weeks ago, I just found another "secret" reader at work who also read "not required" chapters of textbooks. That was the first time I admitted that secret and this will be the second time.

And maybe reading is what brings out the stories in me, so now I think I would like to write

Sharon Oltmanns

Dear Reader,

If there's one thing reaching a milestone birthday makes you do, it is to reflect on your life and ask yourself the following questions: Have I lived a good life? What did I accomplish? Have I helped others? Will I be remembered, and if so, for what? I didn't think I had done that much, but when I looked back I was pleasantly surprised to remember so many wonderful experiences. (I don't count the bad moments, they are fleeting and everyone has those-they build our character).

As a small child, I helped the WW II effort by collecting metal, rubber and selling war bonds to the neighbors, one book of stamps at a time.

I marched in a parade

I played Santa Claus one year.

I wrote a play and my office acted in it for Christmas

With my husband, I gave a motivational speech to 1500 people at a Marriage Encounter Convention.

I witnessed the icepack in Antarctica; saw elephant families marching along on safari in Africa; I have seen some of the beautiful, natural wonders of the world; a rainbow over the falls in Tanzania; the snowcapped Andes and the Alps; towns from a century past along the Yangtze; the splendor and awe of the aurora borealis. I have written poetry and had it published. I witnessed the birth of my son, a miracle of life. I was married to a man I truly believe was an angel. I was valedictorian at my nursing class graduation. If I am remembered at all, I hope it will be for setting a good example for others to follow—to “pay it forward” helping others when they need it most, respecting the environment and saving animals that need a “paw up.” Living for others, and not just for oneself, I guess, is what I would like for my epitaph—it needn’t be written in stone, only etched in the hearts of those I leave behind.

Dorie Furman

Dear Reader,

I'm a voracious reader. How 'bout you?

As a social networking newbie crafting my profile, I wanted to somehow include my love of reading. "I'm a reader." True, but BORING. I need an adjective. Am I an avid reader? An insatiable reader? Or does voracious reader describe me better? Hmm.

In my desire for accuracy, or perhaps perfection, I decide to google those adjectives to ensure they convey what I meant to say about myself. If I substitute enthusiastic for avid, is that it? Accurate, but needs more oomph. Am I ever satisfied? Not quite. If I'm voracious, do I devour books to the point of gluttony? Yikes! That doesn't sound flattering.

Then I reflect on all I have read: cereal boxes, the information on drug studies you get with your new prescription, two book clubs, my insurance policies, IRS Publication 17, the Bible in chronological order, etc. Oh, no! Maybe I AM a voracious reader.

So, what did I learn? Yes, I'm an avid reader. Yes, I'm an insatiable reader. (Although, maybe I should reserve that word to describe my curiosity?) And yes, I confess, I'm a voracious reader. I can't stop at just one book club. You don't have to either.

Elaine Sibrel

Dear Reader,

Today was a good day. My granddaughter Dee was selected from out of hundreds of other 'tweens and teens' to perform during half time at a Sparks game. Well I don't know if

hundreds is correct but I do know there were a lot of others who wanted this as much as granddaughter. By the way, the Sparks are a professional Woman's basketball team here in California, and they as a community project have 'regular' kids, who with no previous dance experience needed, do a fantastic dance routine at half time. The chosen few are known as the Sparks Kids.

I watched in awe as granddaughter tried to absorb the fast paced routines presented to her and the other 20 or so selected kids, ages 8 to 14. The entire group are smiling happily and sweating and were just having fun, trying to grasp the moves. When one part of the routine was successfully performed, they all got high 5's. The instructor is a kind and patient young lady. Where she gets all that energy, I wish I knew! Someone has got to bottle that! We parents, grandpararents and others who were there to cheer and encourage our kids, were a sea of smiles and cameras. And of course, there was her little brother, who rather have been playing baseball instead of being with us here on a basketball court. According to him, this was a place to play, not dance! The look on his face is priceless! As I watched, I was also thinking of my first born son, who passed away two years, nine months ago. His life ended at the age of 34, due to a traffic/automobile accident. Hit and run. How he loved Dee and her little brother. He would have gotten such a kick out of seeing this amazing practice performance and seeing his niece clap, stomp and shake to the music! He would have been the loudest to cheer and scream out his nieces name! Way to go Dee! I wiped away tears of memories past when he would perform in the high school band and I wiped away tears at seeing my granddaughter smile brightly at something she was sure she could do yet inside was a little afraid.

I started this off by saying it was a good day and it was. Grieving had and has become a way of life for me. It was good to smile again. It was good to be among people who were there just for their children. I lose myself in reading and I have read lots. Lots of books on learning to cope and looking for answers to the 'why' question. Lots of books just to read and find myself. Reading to face some of the saddest days and now reading to hopefully accept the sunny days too. Losing someone you love so much just is heartbreakingly painful. Life is thru the eyes of love, and thru the eyes of those who love you just because you are grandma. Life for me now centers around my two precious grandchildren, and of course my loving husband of 38 years, who is my strength and support, the love of my life since I was 15 years old. I also have two other children, one who is the proud mom of the dancer and bored grandson, and another son, who can't wait to see this dance routine all come together. A memory that I will add to the pages of my heart, is that of my granddaughter running to me, with the biggest smile on her face, telling me she is got chosen and will be dancing on a basketball court and wham! She is center stage. Center stage in my heart.

I have learned that there is a tomorrow to look forward to. So many experiences just waiting to happen with the grandchildren, hopefully all good! Although I know I will miss my precious son everyday for the rest of my life, I do know now that I am needed. As a grandma, who now volunteers at the grandchildren's school library, and just being there when called upon to help friends and family. We stick together and support one another. We have also prayed together. We are family, related or not.

Dee has now successfully completed three hours of intense dance rehearsal! She is excited and ready to go home. But first or should I say lastly, there is the group picture. Smiling, sweaty red-faced dancers who are so excited that they have actually completed the entire dance routine, set to music this time. So excited that they can hardly stand still for the photo opportunity that we are all taking advantage of. It has all come together. Go Sparks Kids!!! Yea!

Susan Valdez

Dear Reader,

God is watching us. I know because I have seen it too many times. When I had no money, the Army awarded me a scholarship for medical school, but this is not what I mean about God watching us. I later had to serve as an Army doctor and volunteered to go overseas. I wanted an assignment near a city where I could partake of culture. I got a tiny training post near the East German border.

Saturday before the Labor Day we Americans celebrated even in West Germany, I was called in to see a soldier with fever. He was a tall, very well developed young man who told me his hobby was bodybuilding and that he had had a fever since yesterday. My physical exam of him revealed only fever. Our rudimentary clinic had no holding facilities. I felt silly, considering sending a healthy specimen with only a fever on an hour's ambulance ride to the referral hospital, but it was with considerable misgivings that I sent him back to the barracks where no one would be responsible for watching him. He was instructed to return the next day if he still had the fever.

Return he did, Sunday, appearing quite normal except for fever. I pondered what to do. Fever for three days – I felt uneasy returning him to the barracks again, so I called ahead to the hospital and sent him by ambulance.

Labor Day Monday was quiet. I knew the receiving physician at the hospital, so I called him and asked him about my febrile patient. Upon the patient's arrival they had measured his vital signs, drawn some blood for testing, then watched as he suddenly decompensated. In respiratory arrest, he was placed on a ventilator, and his kidneys failed. Had he not been in the hospital, he would have died.

Months later I was in chapel. At the end of the service the chaplain asked if anyone had special concerns or prayer requests. An emaciated soldier just a few feet away from me raised his hand, stood up, and said he just wanted to thank everyone who had been praying for him during his recovery. This completely transformed young man was my febrile patient.

This is what I mean. God is watching us.

David Mukai

Dear Reader,

First I would like to introduce myself, my name is Marguerite. I'm currently "locked up", but before you imagine the worst I'm in a nursing home which feels worse than being locked up in prison. What makes it very difficult for me is that I have other people making decisions for me, like I'm not aware of how to make them myself.

I'm very thankful for your column because it gives me access to read books other than watching televisions 24 hours a day. It is Friday before the contest deadline. I have been trying to write my entry since the last weekend in August. Writing has always been an agonizing process for me. One of the reasons that writing is so difficult for me is, somewhere between grammar school and high school graduation I miss the basics of Language Arts. You know the important things like spelling, grammar, sentence structure and punctuation. This fear of writing has been following me for a long time. I never made less than a B on my spelling test in school. The problem comes when I have to recall the word and spell it and not have access to a dictionary.

I was fortunate as a undergraduate that my roommate Mary was majoring in English. I would write my papers for English composition. Mary would read and correct my papers. She found it funny that I would use the correct words but transposed the letters of the words. I'm telling you this because it has taking days for me to figure out what I wanted to write. After getting over my spelling and grammar issues, my next hurdle is what am I going to write about.

First I was going to write about one size fits all. This one size fits all concept never worked for me, because I keep running into it in some form in my life. Now I have what I think is a great idea but I'm stuck again. So I called a friend and explain to her I am trying to write a winning column for the book club. Being the organized writer that she is the first thing she told me was to write an outline. Now I'm really in trouble.

Thank you Suzanna

Marguerite M. Pace

Dear Reader,

Everyone has fears. There are common fears and less common fears. There are fears that are considered "rational" and others that are considered "irrational."

Some of the more common fears are considered rational because they involve risk or danger. My mother is one of many people who suffers from acrophobia or a fear of heights. My sister has a fear of snakes (ophidiophobia). My best friend is an arachnophobe because of her fear of spiders.

Other fears are much less common and sometimes hard to explain. My sister has a phobia of icebergs, which is not a common enough fear to have a name. Her fear may not be entirely irrational, since an iceberg is what sank the mighty Titanic. Fortunately, she lives in the Midwest, so she doesn't have much contact with icebergs.

My own phobia is embarrassing to admit, but it's a strong enough fear that I have to tell people about it so they can help me avoid the object of my phobia. I am a bananaphobe. I hate to be in a room with a banana. I will gag if I seem someone eating a banana or if I smell a banana. I can't eat anything that has any banana in it (bread, muffins, fruit salad). I shudder at the image of a banana. Even the sight of a person in a banana suit will make me flinch.

Why am I a bananaphobe? The best reason I can come up with is that as a child I had to take a chewable pill that was an artificial banana flavor. I dreaded taking this pill. Occasionally I could not keep the pill down. But I don't think that explains my fear entirely, because it's not just the taste I fear, but the mushy texture. I have no explanation for that.

This is not a particularly common fear, but a quick Internet search turns up a number of results for "bananaphobe" or "bananaphobia." I wish there were some sort of support group for us bananaphobes. I would love to share strategies for dealing with this fear in everyday life. How do other bananaphobes deal with people eating bananas? What is the best way to deal with sliced banana in an otherwise lovely fruit salad?

I'm Laura and I'm a bananaphobe.

Laura Johnson

Dear Reader,

If you come to visit, "Welcome" and "No Soliciting" are the first signs you see as you enter my neighborhood. These messages imply that you are welcome to enter into this artificial boundary, yet you are not welcome to ask for anything or offer anything while you're here. Even so, many enthusiastic solicitors have come to my door. Would I like to join their religious flock, have a carpet cleaning demonstration, or accept a coupon for a free dinner at a restaurant if I listen to their sales pitch? "No - no, thank you - I'm not interested - I'm busy - good-bye."

After installing a mirror on the inside wall by my front window, I covertly view the reflection of who is at my door. Is it kids from the neighborhood with their hopeful eyes waiting to sell me cookies, popcorn, or other trinkets from a glossy catalog? Or, is it the tree trimmer who seems to arrive at just the right time to offer me a deal? OK, "Yes," then I will answer the door. Deciding who is welcome or not, made me realize that any exchange between two living beings is a form of solicitation. When you come to my door, invited or not, aren't you really asking, "During our time together, will you trade with me something you have for something I have to offer? Will you value me?"

This also applies to the other two- and four-legged members of nature who pass by my door and pause. I observe in awe and decide whether “Yes,” I’ll share a meal with the mother possum as her babies crawl in and out of her pouch; “No,” I can’t feed all these birds at this time, they will make a mess; or “Yes,” I’ll treat the hungry raccoon.

As time passes, the parade of solicitors changes. The kids grow up and are busy with other activities. The familiar tree trimmer never shows up again, leaving me to look out my door for another. The possum and her offspring, along with the birds and raccoon, hopefully have migrated to a more wildlife-friendly area. In a way, I miss them all. Outside my front door, during those brief moments of the “Yes” solicitations, it is hard to tell who has received more from the exchange.

Candace Cervenka

Dear Reader,

I always thought red was a nice color. It brings out the pink of my cheeks and the highlights in my brunette hair when I wear it.

It's the color of candy hearts on Valentines Day and fresh tomatoes still warm from the sun on a hot summer day.

It rests on my body in T-shirts, sweaters and as a tiny little spot in the middle of a beautiful, silver heart necklace that hangs around my neck.

I didn't realize that when I turned 38 years old that this nice, bright color would come to have such a different meaning.

What was once just another color in this big world became a symbol.

Now, I wear it for all the women living and for those who have died. It's a sign of support, a reminder of a battle that's still being fought.

I wear it for me.

In July 2006, just two months shy of my 39th birthday, I had a heart attack and didn't even know it.

I walked around for four days thinking I was battling a bad case of indigestion. I baked a nice cake, entertained my mom and the man who would become my step-dad. I even beat him in a pretty mean game of ping pong, when all the while I was cheating death.

The wrong heart rhythm or other complication and this disease could have snatched away my life.

Two good doctors saved my life – one by recognizing my symptoms, despite my young age. The other by his steady hands, which implanted five heart stents into two major blockages.

Now, I wear red as a symbol of hope.

It's hope that keeps me telling my story, believing that it might just help save the life of one more person.

Today, I wear red with the faith that one day as a old lady, I just might still be picking those big tomatoes, still warm from the hot summer sun.

Teresa Rice

Dear Reader,

My husband and I are on our way to our family's annual camping weekend. We, along with our four adult children and their families all make use of cabins owned by family friends in a tiny town that nobody in the known universe has ever heard of before.

Since it is such a long drive for my husband and I to this tiny town, many things go through my mind, as often happens to someone whose pass time is to worry:

- How lucky I am to have such a wonderful family that we all realize the importance of staying in touch and meeting together regularly. It truly seems that we all enjoy each other's company. Life is good.
- It's really too bad that our youngest son and his family will not be able to make it this year because their dog (with big-time OCD regarding the game fetch) was recently injured in a "fetch" accident and they need to nurse him back to health.
- Did I bring enough food? I realize that I am notorious for an over-abundance of food and every year I tell myself that I will cut back (something like Christmas) but then, there I am again next year with way too much food again. (Do I think that food = love??)
- Will everyone get along? Not that we are the type of family that this happens to a lot, but from time to time, the two older boys, who are only 1 ½ years apart have been known to take offence to something the other one says. The only thing this results in is hurt feelings, but I hate to see that happen. (Is it only my family that is this dysfunctional?)
- Will someone fall into the fire? Having had three sons, all of whom enjoy sitting around the camp fire, you would think that I would be over this one, but now I also have to worry about the grandchildren, the dogs and sometimes, late at night, if I stay up too late and my sons have a few beers under their belts.....

STOP!!! I realize that I am, once again, mired in my own unfounded worries, I pick up my always-handy book and read to quiet these run-away thoughts.

It's always good to read with friends!

Dawn Foote

Dear Reader,

I belong to a book club that is going to be celebrating its 100th year in 2010. The name of the club is Zetema, a Greek word that means "the kind of intellectual question that engages opposing viewpoint". Our club consists of 21 active members and 21 honorary members. One member selects a nonfiction book and presents the review. We meet in the homes of members and end the year with a spring luncheon, which must include chicken, asparagus and strawberries.

As I'm driving to book club I often think about of the book "And Ladies of the Club" by Helen Hooven Santmyer. When I finished reading that book I felt as though I was a part of the lives of those women and likewise I feel that way about our Zetema book club. Even though we don't always agree and we most certainly embrace very different opinions, it's still an honor for me to get to know these women.

I love that our book club is diverse both in attitude and age. I am constantly impressed with the books that are chosen and always appreciative of the conversation that ensues after the review. As we enjoy a glass of wine or juice and nibble on goodies that the hostess has prepared, we engage in wonderful stories about ourselves, our travel, our families and sometimes our struggles. When a member decides that she can no longer do a review or host a meeting she becomes an honorary member and is welcome to attend all meetings. And several do attend!

I don't know about you, but it's important for me to have women friends to share confidences with. I need to have "girlfriends" to laugh with and cry with, to tell me when I'm wrong, to support me when I am unsure and encourage me when I'm right.

Our Zetema club is beginning to plan its centennial celebration. I hope that in addition to chronicling the history of the books that have been read and reviewed over the years, that we will include vignettes about the lives of past members. I'm looking forward to delving in to the history of the club and it's ladies.

Judy Wrobel

Dear Reader,

Gardening

I can remember the joys of gardening from as far back as my childhood. My dad would prepare a large section of our backyard for my mom every year. I can still taste all of the fresh vegetables, and remember some of the best times of my childhood as shelling peas with my mom on the back porch.

I married a fellow home gardener whom I met in college. I knew my husband had a love for the land when he took his first horticulture class. To this day every plant he touches thrives.

Early in the spring my husband and I decide on what we will plant for the new growth season. Sometimes we have a large garden and other years we grow only a few plants. We both find it so therapeutic to work with the earth. The worries just melt away for a few hours.

The taste and pride of a successful garden are immense. Giving fresh vegetables to our friends and neighbors is extremely rewarding when we see the smiles of gratitude on their faces.

As the season winds down for this year, I can't help but wonder what unique ideas and succulent delights my husband and I will think up for next years garden.

Nadine Bird

Dear Reader,

As our kids were growing up I always told them that I was the meanest momma on the block. While it's not entirely true that I was mean, I made sure our kids knew where the boundaries were, and what the consequences were for stepping outside those boundaries.

After our son was born one of the first things people would ask me was, "What are you going to do when he gets taller than you?" I would laugh and say, "He will have a healthy respect for short women." Zac was 21 ¼" long at birth... Emily was 20" long at birth. I am 5'1" tall, on a good day. Needless to say each of them was only 12 when they became taller than I am. Here are some mean mom rules and a few things I learned along the way.

Always gave the kids a 5-minute warning when it's time to leave a friend's house. That way they were never surprised when it is time to go home.

Everyone helps with the dishes. Zac was only 2 when he first started helping clear the table. We found out why our spoons were disappearing when we saw him scrape scraps off the dishes into the trash and toss the spoon in with it.

No means no and arguing is futile.

Everyone sits down to dinner together. No phones are allowed and conversation is mandatory.

Each child gets a day out alone with mom to have lunch, and maybe go shopping, bowling or to a movie, and have a conversation. No topic is off limits.

Soup (or leftovers from dinner last night) is perfectly fine for breakfast.

Girls age in dog years. They often need to be reminded that there is only room in the house for one attitude, which happens to belong to the mom, so they aren't invited to have one.

Never have an odd number of girls over for a party.

Growing up with the meanest momma on the block isn't all bad, in fact, it can be fun.

Lori Sysel

Dear Reader,

I have often bragged that I am not a collector. I'm not one of those people who have shelves crammed with bird things or cat things or frog things. I'm very proud of the fact that I believe in the "less is more" version of acquisition.

I just realized that I'm a liar.

Every time I turn on the computer, I say, "I won't go there. I won't spend the time." But I do. All those wonderful food web sites – Epicurious, Better Homes and Gardens, Cooks.com – just lure me with promises of unforgettable meals. The titles of the recipes intrigue me: lime marinated swordfish, grilled beef skewers with moroccan spices, mediterranean style roasted potatoes. Who can go wrong with mediterranean style roasted potatoes?

I print them out or save them to a file called "recipes," and divided neatly into categories. I now have eight folders of various food categories, stuffed with these printouts.

My computer file labeled "Beef" now has 39 recipes in it, plus one that is labeled "Meat" for pork, lamb and other exotica. The "Meat" file has 32 recipes in it.

I also have files for Appetizers, Barbecue, Desserts/Baking, Eggs, Seafood" (fish is too specific), and, of course, Miscellaneous. (You should see what's in that one.)

How many of these recipes have I actually made? I probably can count them on the fingers of one hand. But what do I do after I pick up a package of Mahi Mahi at Trader Joe's? Of course, I go to the Epicurious web site and look for Mahi Mahi.

I'm obsessed. I admit it. In order to make myself feel better, I'm printing recipes on the backs of other recipes.

I forgot to mention that I now own 19 cookbooks of various denominations.

Perhaps it's time for an intervention.

Betty Chrastka

Dear Reader,

We haven't even told anyone yet, and I'm already worried about everything. What's my parents' reaction going to be? What will his parents think? How will my best friend take it when I tell her I can't see her on her birthday this year as I shouldn't get on an airplane at that point? What am I going to do with a six-week old at my college roommate's wedding?

Then there's the worst-case scenario part of my brain that's been running a quiet film clip whenever I'm not distracting myself. I haven't yet had my first obstetrics appointment, so I'm not certain everything is okay. And even after that appointment, there are still plenty of chances for things to go horribly wrong. What if something *is* wrong? What if everything *isn't* perfect? What if everything *is*?

I've started plotting, in what small ways I can, for work to be covered when I'm gone for six weeks. Some work I can have sit, some I can plan on approving from home occasionally and the rest I can teach to someone relatively easily - this is usually where the worst case film plays a clip of everything going horribly wrong at work and I get called in to deal with a disaster. I think they'll be fine, and that's when I start to worry I am actually easily replaceable. Will my job be different when I come back to work...will there be work to come back to?

There are things I'm looking forward to discovering over the next thirty weeks and beyond. I can't wait to find out boy or girl - I'd rather wait, but my husband won this argument with "don't you think your mother would have a conniption over having to buy yellow and green baby gear?" I can't wait to figure out just how we're going to fit a nursery in our now office. Is our child going to have the white-blond hair we both had as children? Which flavor blue eyes will our child have - my husband's vivid blue or my softer grey-blue? Will Baby EA luck out and receive my teeth and my husband's metabolism? All I'm betting on is ten fingers and toes, hopefully.

Soon, I'll know. And then... the rest of my life to figure it all out.

Rachel Alley

Dear Reader,

Last weekend I decided to take out the trash that was sitting by the front door. It's actually my son's chore, but you know how hard it is for a 16 year old to remember to take out the trash. Especially when it's a large bag and you have to trip over it on your way out the door.

We live in an apartment complex so we have large trash dumpsters and the one for our building backs up to the woods. There is a raccoon who has taken up residence in the dumpster. I've been told by my son that he is people-friendly but I've always heard stories about how raccoons can be vicious and carry rabies so you should steer clear of them. As I was walking toward the dumpster I could hear the pitter-patter of little feet so I slowed down. With the image of a rabid, foaming-mouthed creature in my mind I cautiously turned the corner and peered around the fence. I saw that the dumpster was empty and I heard him walking around inside.

Looking down I noticed that there was a large rusted out hole in the bottom corner of the dumpster, and suddenly what should appear? No foaming mouth, no bared teeth, just two tiny feet sticking out and the cutest little face! He rested his head down on his paws and looked up at me. My heart melted! I didn't dare throw the trash into the dumpster. I couldn't take the chance that I might scare or possibly hurt him. So I set the trash down by the side and knelt down. Being the animal lover that I am, I started talking to him. Believe it or not he actually turned his little head to the side as if listening to me. If anyone was watching me I'm sure I looked like an absolute fool kneeling there talking to a dumpster, but I didn't care. I had a new buddy! So after we had a nice little chat discussing the weather, his home and our families, I went on my way and I'm sure he came out to see just what I had left him for lunch.

Jannee Muhrline

Dear Reader,

There I stood, mesmerized, staring into the open box. Light bounced off the contents telegraphing a message to all who stopped. "Look at me!" the whispers came. "Have you ever seen such perfection?" Mutely, I shook my head.

My mission for serviceable shoes forgotten, I leaned forward and touched the fetching footwear. I tenderly lifted one of the pair and held it close. A tiny heel and a dip that swooped to the sole on one side then topped off with a shiny gold buckle. Perfection.

I gazed longingly, and realized I had never owned a pair of red shoes. But, wait! They were not red, nor were they cranberry or grape. That bright slash of color defied explanation. What word would a poet use? Vermillion? Burgundy? Scarlet? No. Only one would do them justice. Claret, the hue of fine wine. And wonder of wonders, the sign above sported my favorite four-letter word - SALE. And were the shoe gods smiling down on me? Size seven, medium? Yes! Thank you very much.

With the objects of my affection nestled among the crushed tissue, I walked to the counter. More happiness. The shoes were not only on sale, there was an extra discount because it was Tuesday. Tuesday? From now on that would be my favorite day of the week. I floated out into the sunshine.

Suddenly, a horrid thought struck. Nothing in my closet seemed worthy of these gems. What to do? Just across the street, The Top Shop beckoned. Perfect. I jaywalked right over. Thirty minutes later, I emerged with a multi-colored creation whose background magically bore the same shade as the shoes. A block away, I knew there existed a place with the perfect pair of black silk pants to round out the all-time perfect outfit.

All that finery surely deserved a beautiful palette. Three hours later, my nails glowed with Red Passion and I sported a daring new hairdo benefitting the best dressed woman in the neighborhood. I could hardly wait to get home and show my husband what a thrifty purchase the beautiful shoes had been. He'd be so proud.

June Venable

Dear Reader,

Recently I read an article that said that two-year-old humans and dogs are on the same mental plane. I really think most dogs are much smarter than human two-year-olds. I don't know any two-year-olds that could go get someone back at the farmhouse to help Timmy when he was hurt out in the woods like Lassie did.

The article listed the dogs in order of intelligence and border collies were at the top of the list. Lassie wasn't a border collie, but she was a collie. Next in the list of six in order were poodles, German shepherds, golden retrievers, Dobermans, Shetland sheepdogs, and Labrador retrievers.

One year when our neighbors were gone on a trip and left their dogs home their German shepherd must have opened the latch on the gate from the backyard. He ran around the neighborhood for awhile, then decided he needed to go home. However, he couldn't reopen the gate from the front yard into the backyard since it had closed behind him. He tore a hole in the gate with his claws, but couldn't make it big enough to get through. When my husband came outside the dog saw him, ran over to him, barked, and led him to his gate. He barked until my husband opened the gate to let him back inside his backyard. My husband fixed the latch so the dog couldn't open it again and put a board over the hole in the gate so the smaller dogs inside couldn't get out.

We had a golden retriever for several years. When she came to live with us we had six cats and she lived with us in our house. Our cats did not like her sudden presence and were mean to her. They hissed at her, scratched her in the face and on her nose, but she never tried to hurt them. It took some kind of restraint in her to not retaliate. Whether that is intelligence, I don't know, but it was impressive to us. Since she was, however, at

least ten times bigger than they were, we didn't want to have her reach the end of her rope someday and gobble one of them, so she got to go live outside.

The article is at <http://www.womenshealth.gov/news/english/629792.htm?from=newsletter9> if you'd like to read it yourself.

Carolyn Gutierrez

Dear Reader,

Have you recently taken the time to notice that no one takes time? When was the last time you took a leisurely bath? Even the shower time gets shorter and shorter. Hurry, hurry and on to the next..

I noticed this at first in Boston as I was escorted en masse up the subway stairs wedged in the crowd on way to their morning jobs , coffee in hand. I hardly had the opportunity to view the sun reflected in the massive windows or watch the boats in the Harbor sailing in with many other workers to join our daily rush.

As I age and our grandchildren join us one by one, I notice I savor every little thing they do and say. Did I do this with all my seven children? I wanted to but didn't have the time. Age, as often as the process makes us groan, has a healing power of serenity . The cricket's melody sounds very pleasant these days, a single violet's purple shade seems more vivid, and a person's laughter is music to our ears.

A wonderful experience I enjoyed recently was actually reading Ivan Doig;s, " Dancing at the Rascal Fair, word by word and cherishing each sentence. Don't we sometimes feel the need to rush through a book as we have to get it read for Book Club or get on to the next activity ? To delightfully peruse a book is another blessing awarded those of us in the golden years. My only regret is that I didn't get to relish more of the little things when I was younger but fortunately age does provide us the chance to look back on the many memories we can relive and hopefully "time" will provide the opportunity for many more in the making.

That bath water should be just the right temperature now. I think I'll grab my book , meander in and soak peacefully until the bubbles disappear.

Mary Healey

Dear Reader,

I am a cat. I normally weigh 15 pounds, and am 13 years old (although I do not look it)! My name is SALT, alias Kitty, my usual moniker.

When I came in for my yearly check up and shots, the vet said I was in fine shape, except for my teeth. He suggested that I have them cleaned. My owner asked about the price and was told around \$200.00.

I did not want to have my teeth cleaned because I was afraid, but my owner made me an appointment anyway. When I got there, someone shaved my leg (now my family keeps telling me to pull up my socks) and gave me a shot that put me into a sleep, although I am already very talented at sleeping. I don't know what took place after that, but I was so glad to be picked up and taken home! When I got there, I jumped out of the car and ran right over to the neighbor's yard to use my favorite toilet. (What?...You don't expect me to use my own yard, do you?)

Do you know, now I can eat again! I have already gained back most of the weight that I had lost. I am so glad my owner paid the \$257.00 to fix up my teeth, even though she thought it seemed like a lot.

Thank you,
SALT Rohrer
Erma Rohrer

Dear Reader,

Have you ever had that event in your life that just haunts you to this very day?

Mine doesn't really haunt me in a bad way; if anything I am more than grateful it happened.

A fixture in my life forever, my first job at the public library.

The people I met there I still remember so vividly that if I close my eyes I can see them. Miss Petunia, an older lady with an oversized bag that carried exactly 3 books wearing, you guessed it, petunias. The young lady that every week she had a new major at the local university, the middle aged man that made roses out of palm leaves, the Muslim mother that tried so hard to learn English so she could communicate with her children, just to name a few. Then some not so good people, the man that smelled like garbage that liked to watch me shelve books or the lady that would argue about her 10 cent fine. People that showed me the ugly side of human nature, but more good things than bad happened when I worked there.

I made some of the best friends I have ever had working at the library. Working there changed me. I was never the social butterfly but the library made me open myself up in a way I never thought possible and for the first time in my life I felt at peace. (Plus I read some really good books.)

It's funny now that I am moving on with my life when I get stressed and freaked out I always go back to my roots: the library. The moment I walk in and take a deep breath of

that musty library air I just feel my muscles relax and my cloudy brain clear. The other day I was there after a stressful day, sitting in an overstuffed chair, reading, and I looked up to see Miss Petunia coming in with her three books, the young lady that finally became a doctor, and the lady arguing once again about her ten cent fine. Some things never change.

I wonder what they see when they look at me?

I hope that today will be the day that years from now you will remember and smile at the beauty that was yesterday

Gwen Reyes

Dear Reader,

9-10-09 Never too late

It was just before 6 am and we were both awake. The coolness of the morning was delicious after the recent unending heat wave.

“Hey, this is a perfect morning to take the boat on the lake and see the sunrise,” I said to my special 65 + guy lying next to me.

“Aw, I need my coffee and to sit the with newspaper for a while,” he groaned.

I had just watched an old movie with Myrna Loy and Clark Gable where he was going to have to step down from being a test pilot to a flight instructor, much to wife Myrna’s relief. The headman warned her “there’ll be a lot of squawking” he said, to which she just smiled. Sure enough in the next scene he is squawking, “I should be up there, what am I doing here on the ground,” he growled, and she just smiled.

Remembering the movie, I smiled instead of getting frustrated and said, “I’ll make the coffee and get the boat ready” and hurried off.

He came and it was surreal. We’ve been here 10 years and I’d always wanted to see the world wake up from a little boat on water and there we were. The water was like glass, the ducks just sat groggily along the shore, and we had front row seats to seeing the purple-gray hills slowly warm to a burnish-gold and then the homes below them step out of the shadows and glow under an ever brightening sky. And it was so much nicer seeing it with my guy.

Next scene, he’ll be telling everyone what a fun thing we did the other day and I hope I remember to just smile.

Andlen

Dear Reader,

It's been said that you can't go home again. But sometimes you are able to do just that. I left home for college in 1964 and haven't been home except for visits. Yet here I am sitting in what was my parents' bedroom, looking out at the same view they had for over 50 years, smelling cooking odors from the kitchen as I have for almost 64 years. When my mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer, my brother and I determined that she would remain in her home for the time she had left and we would take care of her ourselves. So I left my family and moved back home where things were so familiar, yet so different. Mother is now residing in my old room. Her adjoining bathroom used to be my brother's small bedroom. I am in my parents' room using a brand new laptop on top of an old desk that is probably as old as I am. As I go through cabinets and drawers and closets I find parts of my childhood tucked away. The egg beater I remember watching mother use countless times. How fascinating for a young child to watch eggs become frothy or potatoes to become whipped! The salt and pepper shaker collection that was amassed over 30 years. Remembering how I used to get one whole dime for dusting what seemed like thousand of shakers, but in reality was only hundreds. The projection screen that provided many hours of entertainment as slides were shown of vacations and special events. The books that fascinated me so and helped develop my love of reading, such as *The Girl in the Blue Pinafore* and *The Five Little Peppers and How They Grew*. Sitting on the front porch swing watching cars streaming by on the four lane highway, remembering when it was once a quiet, narrow country road. How many times did I sit on that porch with a date? Or with my dad listening to his words of wisdom? All too soon this time will be over and I will never be able to return home. Will I have enough memories to sustain me?

Ruby E.

Dear Reader,

A Confession after 40 years

My most embarrassing moment happened over 40 years ago and I still find the event difficult to talk about.

It happened in the 1960's when the world was a much different place. It was before women wore slacks in public and a time when laundry was always done on Mondays.

On a Monday morning I needed to go to the local grocery store for a few items. Since it was a wash day the only pair of underwear I could find was in the far back of my drawer rolled into a ball. I had to put on that pair added a dress and headed to the store with my husband driving our car.

When I got out of the car, I realized too late why the underpants had been hidden in the back of the drawer. They were a very old pair and the elastic was no longer strong enough to hold them in place thus as I walked they were sliding down over my hips.

It was too late to turn back so I locked my knees together and managed a duck-like waddle down the aisles of the store. When I got to the checkout with my dignity still intact I started to breathe a sigh of relief knowing that my ordeal would soon be over.

But that feeling of relief was over as soon as I got outside the store because there in front of me was a curb which I was going to have to step off of. I motioned with my hand for my husband to bring the car closer but he just sat there and shook his head, no. I motioned again and he shook his head again. I had no other choice so I took that step. My underwear dropped and our car motor started almost immediately. As the car pulled beside me I opened the door, all the while ignoring the offending item which I let lay on the parking lot, and asked my husband, why he did not come and pick me up? He answered that he thought that since I had been trying to lose weight he knew the exercise would do me good! Needless to say it was a long time before I went into that store again.

Barbara Thoricht

Dear Reader,

I am often asked why I write mysteries. I suspect it's because these are the novels I've enjoyed reading the most in my years of voracious reading. The inherent puzzle posed in the genre structure teases my mind with its challenge to create an interesting yet complete story.

Having to write within a format that has certain conventions reminds me of the poetry that started my writing life. That format gives me a clothesline to hang my ideas on, and moves my theme along classical lines. Mysteries make good storytelling because the reader can identify with the sleuth and the villain, the light and dark sides of one's own nature, coupled with a sublime mingling of the possible with the impossible. As Sue Grafton says, ". . . the mystery is the one form in which the reader and the writer are pitted against each other."

I credit my mother with my love of literature as she taught me to read before I started kindergarten. Most afternoons we would sit side-by-side in a forest green armchair, the swirled chenille pressing against the back of my legs. She would read from the Childcraft Books she'd bought when I was born, first Mother Goose rhymes, then stories that told tales of wonder, imagination, and foreign lands. I was bit by the reading bug.

I learned to read by seeing the familiar words over and over, day after day. In kindergarten I would skip to the end of the book the teacher read aloud, bored at her slow pace. That little habit was frowned upon, but my base of reading gave me a firm foundation for my school years.

That is why when my first novel is published this spring, it will be dedicated to my husband for his support; and to my mother, who started it all so many years ago.

Marni Graff

Dear Reader,

Accountability

I just transferred the laundry to the dryer from the washer, and it was coated with pebbles of white tissue from the pocket of my jeans. This just after I damaged my leftover meatloaf sandwich by leaving it in the microwave for a whole minute, French bread included, rendering it to hard tack status. Nope, the day isn't starting well-- and yes, I am preoccupied and second guessing myself. Should I shake off the tissue all over the laundry room floor or let it be collected by the dryer lint trap? Could it cause a fire? I never clean it out with one of those long thingamajigs you can buy at Bed, Bath and Beyond. To hell with it. To hell with almost anything today.

My general sense that I am incompetent comes from one thing: Three of my friends sent off their kids, my kid's buddies, to college this week—off to Barnard, Georgetown, and Chicago-- but I did not. They are nervous wrecks because they have catered to them for 17 years, 18 entitled years, counting being inside their bellies full of yoga and prenatal vitamins, and they don't really know what to do with themselves or exactly how to channel their worries that their kids aren't "ready" for this big responsibility. Did I fail to say that I've sent my son to a wilderness program? It's not one of those boot camps, but a true therapeutic woods experience, complete with amazing therapy once a week and group every day, survival skills training, homemade trail mix, and plenty of peer support from similar kids. My kid hasn't had a good week in school since first grade. He's been more than familiar with the hall, the counselor and principal's offices, summer school, numerous psychologists, the library as a classroom, and suspension, in and out of school. He's had any number of teachers sure they know how to "handle kids like him." Rules or consequences have never been a learning tool for him; he's always deigned to create his own from scratch. Sometimes they worked for a while; usually they worked long enough to reinforce doing things his way. He's quick and intelligent, lively and funny, and instantly liked or considered an annoyance. I have no idea what will happen. None of us can.

Adrienne Robins

Dear Reader,

Have you heard the words, "Life is a stage" and wonder what they mean? Well my friend, all you have to do is take one quick look at me to find out. I have lived my life everyday as if I was living it on a stage. I try to become Julia Childs when I cook dinner.

I put on my Mother Theresa mask when I visit a sick friend. I attempt to be Hugh Jackman when romancing my wife. I put on my Pa Ingalls overalls and voice when sharing wisdom with my children.

I blame you, my audience, for keeping me on that stage; after all, if I go out of character for just a few minutes you might boo and leave your seat. At least that's my fear – so I've continued to live on stage trying to be whatever the act requires of me.

Today I have decided that it's time to leave the theater. It's time to walk off that stage. It's time for the Phantom to remove his mask and let everyone see who has been hiding there for so long. By removing my mask I'm sure that the quality of my voice will not change – yet my vision might just become better. And with that better vision I will become a better friend, a better husband, and a better father. It's time that I realized that Hugh Jackman is a much better Hugh Jackman than I could ever be – just as Mother Theresa was a much better Mother Theresa than I could ever hope to be.

Today all you will see is the me behind the mask. I hope you like what you see. It's risky for me. As I take that risk, I hope that you will take the time to really look at me. Take the time to really see me. I promise to do my best to be me.

Oh, I've not told you who I am. You don't know – I might be your friend, or your husband, or your father, so please look to see me it just might be the first time we've ever really met.

Rick G. Martin

Dear Reader,

I was very fortunate to grow up living across the street from our church's parsonage. The preacher and his wife had two daughters (just the right ages to be my playmates) and a son, Matthew, who was good friends with my brother Roy. Our families had some wonderful times together that have left me with many warm, and often funny, memories.

My father would cut my brother's hair at home, perching him up on the top of a step stool with a towel pinned around his neck. Dad used a loud, buzzing electric hair clipper with vibrating metal teeth. One day my father was giving Roy a haircut while Matthew was there watching the operation. Dad noticed that Matthew's hair had grown quite long--so long, in fact, that it nearly covered his eyes. Dad offered, "Matthew, after I finish cutting Roy's hair, you can just hop up here and I'll cut your hair too." Matthew quickly responded, "No thank you, sir, I can still see!" I think my father managed to keep a straight face at the time, but my family has gotten a lot of chuckles since then thinking of Matthew's conclusion that he didn't need a haircut as long as he could still see.

The last few days I've been noticing that my bangs will be in need of a trim soon, but for today I think I'll just take a cue from Matthew, push my hair out of my eyes, and keep on reading. After all, I can still see!

Rachel Stakelum

Dear Reader,

My Mom sent her four kids a recent email about this Dear Reader contest and you could sense her eyes popping out of their sockets when she told us the first prize was a collection of eighty books. My mom has had a love affair with books ever since I can remember.

Mom and Dad met in college following World War II. Dad was a handsome, athletic six-footer with blonde hair and blue eyes. Mom was a preacher's kid, slim, black hair, blue eyes, a beauty queen and valedictorian of her high school class. To this day, she remains the most intelligent person I've ever met and I suppose that's due to her love of books and reading.

My earliest childhood memories include Saturday mornings when Mom would roust us out of bed early; fix us a healthy breakfast, then load the two youngest kids into our red, American Flyer wagon and we'd trek across the small Iowa town to the public library. My older brother and I would take turns pulling the wagon and listening to Mom's cheerful chatter about the books she hoped to find this week. This happened every Saturday. Mom always checked out four or five books and she'd somehow find time to read all of them between raising four kids and running the household.

Upon our arrival at the library, Mom would deposit us kids in the children's book section with one instruction; we each could pick one book to take home. We always thought it unfair that she got four or five and we only got one, but we loved being able to take a book home to read. My favorites were the "We Were There" stories of historical fiction that placed children into important historic events with such folks at Lewis and Clark and the early settlers traversing the Oregon Trail.

Mom is eighty one years old now and her greatest worry is the macular degeneration that is slowly deteriorating her sight. She still goes to the library every week, the new public library that she fought nearly ten years to have built for the community. It really won't matter if she doesn't get 80 books. After reading them, she'd just donate them to her beloved public library anyway.

Mark Randall

Dear Reader,

INCIDENT

Each generation passes to the next links of its history, stories that are remembered because they are retold. This is one of those stories more than 100 years old, about a hard-working tobacco farmer who lived in south-central Virginia a century ago. This is Acie Hamlette's story.

Acie and his family worked the land. They had built a sturdy frame house on flat rock. The kitchen was in the back of the house, near the well. The house faced the crops. To the right, were acres of tobacco fields; to the left were fenced-in pasture land. Near the house, about 400 yards to the left, was the out buildings.

Every day had a pattern. Acie was hungry now. He walked to the house, glad to see that Alma had prepared the table. Kitchen smells drew the boys. After a generous slice of pie, Acie was ready to bring in the cow and calf.

Dark now, Acie got a kerosene lantern from the back porch and walked around the house. He noted the front door was open as usual, but knew the screen door was latched. He met the cow at the pasture gate, ready for the short walk to the stable, calf following. In fluid movement, Acie set out fresh water, hay, gave the cow a rub-down and milked her. Heading to the house, the lantern swinging back and forth to light his way, he heard something behind him; first thought, maybe a hound? But he sensed a quiet stealth of another kind; a cougar was stalking him!

He kept on swinging the lantern, hoping to ward it off. He hurried toward the front door and called to the house to OPEN the screen door WIDE. The oldest boy, Otis, saw the cougar, grabbed his rifle and held the door open wide! A few feet away, Acie dropped the milk pail and swung the lantern behind him. It flared up, the cougar ran, Acie completed two giant strides to safety.

Early morning, rifles in hand, Acie and Otis tracked the cougar. They discovered remains of a feral pig behind the barn. The cougar was not seen again. Acie, and others who came after, are grateful for the swinging lantern that saved his life and gave us his story.

L.Edward Sizemore

Dear Reader,

“You’ve never been skinny and you never will be,” said a cherished family member as we talked about my attempt to lose weight. At first I felt angry and tried to justify my current weight. I’ve been a working mom and recently had my second child. Who has time to work out or watch portions when there are a million things to do?

I continued to find reasons why I had not lost enough weight, but I eventually felt defeated. The painful reality is that I’ve been overweight most of my life, so my patterns have been well established. I had set out a goal to run a 10k to keep focused. I’d been enjoying my 10k training for almost a month through soreness and sweat, but my next run felt much harder to get through.

Trying to get out of this negative mindset, I remembered the movie Rudy. Rudy's family could not envision his success. Even after many obstacles and failures, he kept trying and eventually reached the level he had dreamed of even if it was just for a moment. His passion sustained him when others said he could not achieve his goal.

What makes change and success hard is that we do not see our desired results right away. We need that drive that makes us get up in the morning to keep working on our goals. No matter how many failures and setbacks, we can dust ourselves off and get back to work. There can be a long road to our new and improved selves, but achieving something that is difficult makes life sweeter. Why not make the attempt?

We don't have to let people's words stand in our way. We can tune out the negativity and carry on with our plans. Now when I go on my runs, I remember that hurtful statement. I won't allow it to defeat me because I take it as a test. It adds fuel to make me want to push harder. I keep sight of my goal of running a 10k, something not everyone can claim. Maybe I won't be skinny then, but I WILL cross the finish line.

Ana Vela

Dear Reader,

Recently something got me thinking about how my love of reading began. Despite a full time job, and lots of activities, I still make time to read several books a month. Even as a child I was a voracious reader. I used to take my books and hide so I could read without being interrupted by chores or siblings. I wonder if I read to my siblings? I hope I did, but I surely did read to my children as long as they let me.

I remember the first library I used. It was close to home, in a school building. I have a vision of big double doors, shelf after shelf of books and the funny camera machine that "scanned" your library card with the title card from the inside pocket of the book to keep track of your checkouts.

I remember the "B is for Betsy" series by Carolyn Heywood and books by Beverly Cleary. These would be tremendously out of date for young readers today but they were my first experience with getting to know characters that seemed so different from me.

When our family moved to a new house alas there was no library and I had to wait for the Bookmobile to come. It only came every three weeks and there was a limit on the number of books you could check out because there were so many people who had to be serviced. This too I can visualize and even hear – swinging the door open, walking up the metal steps and then into what I think of now as a cozy little camper filled to the brim with books.

Today, it's the on-line catalog where I can browse any time of the day. I have a life long love of serialized novels, and by using the on-line catalog I can order a whole series at

once, or at the very least, put them in my favorites so I can easily find the next one when its time to move on. These books have to be read in order, of course, so you get to know the characters, just like getting to know real people. And maybe that's why I've always loved reading. It's just like meeting new people each and every time you open a new book.

Nancy Moore

Dear Reader,

I was greeting grandma for what seemed to be the first time in my life. It was a weenie little voice. Mama was 68 and I was one of her numerous grandchildren.

I would always stare at her as she chewed on some tobacco leaf and potash*. Some times I wondered who this woman was. She was always at home with me, giving me food I didn't like to eat. She often beat me with words and an overdose of extreme care.

Many times I offended her but she would never carry out her constant threats to report me to my dad. I remember sneaking into mama's room to get a taste of her seemingly delectable early morning treat. As I tucked my fingers into my mouth she stepped right in as if she was the one directing my play. I couldn't swallow the unchewed leaves and potash, nor spit it out nor run. she asked "where did you put the small knife that we kept in the kitchen? I could not answer. The knife was right there beside the tin of tobacco leaves. To make matters worse the contents of my mouth was burning hot.... Hmmn it was no where near tasty. It was a typical case of being in between the devil and the deep blue sea. She knew almost immediately what I did. She simply reached for my mouth and squeezed. Out it came as I gladly released it, my tongue burning from within.

Mama is now 94 years old and looking at her I cannot but smile. She still speaks parables, only this time she hardly explains any. And yes! She still chews her tobacco leaf everyday, 30 minutes before breakfast. Whoever said the elderly had nothing to pass on? She taught me what I later read in books. Now I think what if she had gone to school? Maybe I would have been the grandson of Marie curie...my surname would still not have been curie.

I had to move to the city. Mama did not say too much. However in her sad countenance she simply smiled and looked at me. "Remember all we have talked about and make sure you don't smell anything you don't want to eat". I nodded tranquilly, knowing what she meant.

kizito adejumo

Dear Reader,

I hate mornings. I mean “where’s the snooze button, where’d the night go, isn’t it Saturday yet? Oh woe is me” type of “hate mornings.” Really hated mornings - at least until I read John O’Hurley’s book **It's Okay to Miss the Bed** *on the First Jump: And Other Life Lessons I Learned from Dogs* and gained a different outlook for the start of each day.

While O’Hurley starts with a mere love fest in their bed, we (two dogs, two cats, two humans) start each day with NPR’s “Good Morning!” precisely at 7AM. With this cheerful announcement, we officially start the morning with my retired husband’s “Good morning, Sadie!” and ‘Is Tootsie all bright eyed and bushy tailed?’” The dogs (a cocker spaniel and a terrier rescue – “Terrier-ist” as my husband calls her) respond with wiggling, starting from the stubs of their tails up to their ears; pink tongues aiming for the nearest ear, belly rubs and body hugs and grins all around. Pepper, the black cat, is chirping between the dogs trying to find some loving; Cotton, the white cat is bellowing from a safe distance down the hall.

Next, we have our version of O’Hurley’s “Great Feeder”. The O’Hurley dogs totally abandon him and follow his wife into the kitchen. In our tribute, we have “Leftovers!” or the food that the two cats did not inhale the night before. The “Great Walker” is now in charge, and I, like O’Hurley, am a forgotten lump in the covers.

Next, “gotta find my chooz” can be heard from the other room. Suddenly, two dogs that cannot walk at heel on a lead are magically transformed, strutting behind my husband – exactly 4 inches behind his knees. When the “chooz” are found, the dogs will sit obediently until everyone is ready to go.

Finally, we have “Air Sadie” (after a 2-foot launch straight up) and “the Tootsie-Meister” waiting patiently for the leads to be put on – chins up, butts down, stubs wiggling joyfully. The morning walk to “go greet Mr. Sun” (yes, my husband talks to the Sun each morning) is underway. Outside, the birds are singing, and all is right in their world.

I still honestly dislike mornings, but I do have to admit that I am starting to find them much more enjoyable.

Robin Poirier

Dear Reader,

It's a beautiful day. Life is good, life is calm and life feels magnificent today. It's rare that I feel such joy and jubilation. As I sit on my couch, looking out the window, I see all the beauty and wonder God has created. I am filled with such peace and joy as I soak it all in.

Both of my children are occupied at the moment. My oldest is taking a nap trying to recover from a sleep over and my youngest is making a birthday card for her Grammy. My husband has volunteered to wash the car and stop by the grocery store. So here I am

all alone with no deadlines, no pressure, no place to be – just me and my lingering thoughts. It's nice to be able to take a moment and enjoy the quietness of the day.

My eyes are getting heavy as I lounge on the couch listening to the soft hum of the dryer. I know in a moment I'll be folding laundry and reigning in the chaos but in the interim I'm allowing my mind to wonder to an excellent place. Oh, how sweet life can be! The world looks spectacular and brilliant when I take the time to notice. The trees are softly swaying on the other side of the window and the flowers are glistening in the sun. Everywhere I look I'm surrounded by beauty.

I let my eyes close further and my mind wanders to my family. I have such an amazing family and they are my greatest blessing. I love and appreciate the family I was given. It's transforming to dwell on the positives for a change and I feel my emotions swell. Oh, how I needed to be reminded of all that I have to be grateful and thankful for. My worries and anxieties slowly fade into the distance. My negative thoughts are replaced with soothing memories and great promises of tomorrow. This is how life was intended -to be filled with great love and joy.

Slowly, my mind is enveloped by the tranquil, relaxing atmosphere as I drift off into the abyss. Before I know it, my husband and children are gently shaking me, whispering, it's time to wake up.

Tracy White

Dear Reader,

Forgive me Readers, for I have sinned.

Greed certainly came first in mind as I observed the triple-stacked books overflowing from my bookshelves. One of them occupied an entire wall in the family room. Then there is the bookshelf in my bedroom, and another in my toddler son's room. You'd argue that it should not count since it only consists of his books, but then I would have to confess half of those children books are fairy tales and princesses story books. Not quite *Thomas the Tank Engine*.

Gluttony arrived after as I usually have a bag of Jalapeno potato chips in hand while reading a brand spanking new book or re-reading an old one for the umpteenth times. Well, it wouldn't be so bad, except I tend to finish the bag before finishing the book. You'd kindly suggest a healthier alternative, such as carrot sticks or celery. They're not bad, but they're not chips.

Sloth realized in a form of two or more heaping mountains of unfolded laundry standing helplessly next to the ironing board as I frantically tried to find a less-wrinkled blouse for work. I overslept and was running late this morning since I stayed up until 3 am finishing up *Sundays at Tiffany's*.

My collection of romance novels – excuse me – hot steamy romance novels are the reason that I couldn't help but have *lust* in mind. Was it really wrong for me to *envy* those voluptuous heroines in those novels?

All who knows me can testify how evenly tempered I am, but *wrath* can take over in a second when I see any abused book. Dog-eared and any kind of graffiti would fall to abused category. You should see me trying to so hard not to even make any crease on my brand new books. I paid a lot of money for it. I want them in pristine conditions. But then I always buy a second copy of my favorite books. Just in case. Guess that explain sin number one, right?

And don't you know it. It was *pride* that drove me to write this Dear Readers letter. I'm actually proud of this over-the-top-not-to-mention-insane confession. It's a sickness, I know. But I'm not sure I'd ever want to be cured. There you have it. I confessed!

Sitha Kosasih

Dear Reader,

I was 16 years old in the summer of 1943. I wanted a job for the 2 plus months before going back to school. We lived a block away from the New York Central RR in Cleveland, Ohio. I was always in love with railroads and could think of no better company to work for.

I soon found myself at the Railroad Retirement Board, filled out an application and was shortly notified to report to the NYC repair track on Cleveland's east side.

My first day on the job was a bit frightening but I was assigned to work with Art and Jim as their supply boy. Two super fine men who showed me all the highliigts of air brake repair.

Supply boys were kept busy. The jobs were dirty, hot and at times exhausting. One had to go on top, around and under the railroad cars.

One particular day a loaded cattle car was brought in with an overdated air cylinder. I brought in a new cylinder and as I was placing it underneath the floor the cow above my head answered nature's call. Since the floors in cattle cars are spaced a bit apart I received the bulk of nature's call. Fortunately I had a cap on but I was a mess. That was a trying experience but I stayed with the railroad for 44 years.

Railroading has been my life and I've never regretted a day of it.

Charles Laufer

Dear Reader,

When did I grow up? Not physically of course, because I am still only 5'8", same as when I was 13. I guess my lack of height has always made me feel young, but the other day I saw a cartoon in the newspaper that hit home. A Mom and Dad with a little boy and girl are standing in front of a restroom sign and the caption over the Dad says, "you take her, I'll take him". The next frame shows a now grown boy and girl standing in front of the restroom with elderly parents and the caption over the young man says "and we will meet back here". Oh My God-that's me. Just the other day at the movies with my family, my daughter said, "I'm taking mom to the bathroom, I'll meet you back here". Since when do I need someone to take me to the bathroom? I'm part of the baby boom generation and there are signs all around me now that I never saw before; senior prices at the movies; senior menus at restaurants and senior discounts. They even have a senior "day care" center in our town.

Wweell, I can't be a senior-I'm still only 5'8", same as when I was 13.

Gayle Skeens

Dear Reader,

This morning's email brought a message from a friend inviting me to join her for an 'Elvis impersonator' concert this weekend. I have always enjoyed Elvis Presley's music, and remember all the fantastic songs. My sisters and I jived to the great tunes on the radio in the farm kitchen when our parents were out, (they disapproved of dancing and 'rock n roll' music). We could only imagine how other kids danced; (no TV and no movies allowed) so we improvised, using our gyrating rhythms and imagined fantasy of Elvis.

A visit to relatives one Sunday put us in front of the Ed Sullivan TV show, and much to our parents horror, there was Elvis, swinging and singing! We were mesmerised, and now had a great visual which far surpassed what we had ever imagined! After seeing and hearing Elvis Presley, our dancing changed. Arguments with my sisters about how,when and what body moves Elvis made, affected our previous, spontaneous jiving. We never quite measured up to the reality, and felt judged by each other's creative attempts at impersonation. Teenage lack of self-confidence also played a huge role here.

The pattern of the imagined and the real, reflects how reading books influenced my life. Exceptionally well written characters and plots come alive, and it is often difficult to sit through a movie when I know the book and my imagination far exceeds what the screenwriters included in the script.

Laughing out loud, crying and cheering are allowed when the scene warrants the emotions, but if diluted, or greatly altered on screen, are never quite the same. Knowing the outcome in advance has a lot to do with the reluctance on my part to see the characters come to life on a large screen. I can still be swayed by raving reviews to believe 'book to movie' will be worth the price of admission and entertainment, but very

rarely am I rewarded with an outstanding, believable performance.

My friend's invitation to see an impersonation of Elvis Presley may be turned down for the same reason. Leave me to my memories of how the songs and stories play out, they will usually be richer, personal and most of all, mine.

"Richer than I you will never be, for I had a mother who read to me"
Thanks for reading and enjoying great books with me.

Ms. Esther White

Dear Reader,

This column was to be about my brother, Butch, who passed away in December. He was an awesome man and accomplished so many things, that it was overwhelming trying to figure out how to start, and continue, about Butch. My mind stopped. Then I realized I had to get his van title transferred to my name before the fees went up on September 1st. The fees in Florida were about to almost double. I took his title and license tag from the van to the tag/title office. The clerk asked if I had an old tag of mine (in my name) to transfer the van to. She pulled up my two current registrations, and I told her I still owned both vehicles. She did a search on the computer and found my 1976 Datsun and said she would try to use that tag to avoid the \$100 fee for a new tag. She kept her fingers crossed - literally - as the computer worked, but no success. I had to pay the \$100 fee for a new tag. I asked her if everything was going to cost more than \$200 as I had only brought \$200 cash with me, since they don't accept debit cards and I didn't have my checkbook with me. She said it should be under \$200. She pulled the receipt from the printer and it was \$214.35. I looked in my wallet and counted my extra bills - \$14.00 exactly, then my change purse - \$.35 plus a nickel and some pennies. I handed it over to her with a "WOW" comment and she repeated the "WOW." Then I remembered the parking garage - "Do you validate parking?" She said they could validate for only 30 minutes, but I had been there about 45 minutes. She got out her purse and handed me 50 cents from her own wallet and said "Hopefully, this will get you out. If not, come back in, and we'll take a collection for you." I profusely thanked her for the 50 cents. I got to the cashier at the exit of the parking garage - it was \$1.00. Then I remembered a "Kitty" coin container in the glove box - Lo and behold, a dollar appeared! A small miracle indeed, with Butch as my guardian angel above.

Pam Fair Seibert

Dear Reader,

The pressure to supply quick answers at workshops usually leaves me in a lurch. I freeze at ice-breaker questions. Pens click away on both sides of me as others scribble answer after answer - favorite candy bar, favorite movie, dream car, dream this, dream that. Dream job? At least I've got a show stopper for that one. It's my one canned answer, my

secret weapon, the response that makes me the envy of the conference, the talk of the session.

My answer stems from a fascination with paper dolls, doll houses, museum models and Dept. 56 houses. I devised my dream career about ten years ago while driving down Sarah Brooks Drive with my husband. I remarked on the lovely street name, and he told me the street was named after the newborn granddaughter of a city employee who was helping survey a proposed subdivision. I'd always imagined Sarah Brooks as the beautiful daughter of a wealthy land owner who had bestowed the property to the city. That's where imagination takes over and my dream job materializes. Avenue, place, drive, court—all easily defined. It's what comes before that, that fantastical concoction, that connotation, that street name, that perseveres.

I've even invented the job description for my ideal career. Research local history, visit subdivision sites, examine the geography, predict the development of an area. My dream job whisks me into my world of fantasy and fascination with miniature life. Developers, local officials and city planners come to me, and I name streets for them. Do they want to complement a nearby helicopter plant (Sikorski, Whirlybird)? Do they want to spark patriotism (McHenry, Rampart)?

Experience – well, I've been naming streets in my imagination for years. I used to pass an overgrown, abandoned speedway where Evel Knievel once raced. Right on the edge of suburbia, the ghostlike acreage emitted a mystery – like an abandoned drive-in movie. I could hear the crowd, the roar of the Harley, see the lift of the motorcycle, the fringe of Evel's shirt waving in the wind. Then the inevitable development -- a naked landscape with concrete streets brandishing lackluster names. If only I could have named those streets. I'd go with Snake Canyon Court, Daredevil Drive, Robbie Lane, Evil Way. Mysterious, thrilling, daring, imaginative – just like my dream job.

Diane J. Skelton

Dear Reader,

Young mothers and fathers: please hug and play with your children while they are still at home. Get down on the floor with them. Even if they have a teen after their age, they still sometimes prefer the floor to chairs. Also, the front or back steps has historically been a spot where some of the most memorable conversations have taken place. Meet them wherever, with your most valuable gift of time.

It will comfort “you” beyond anything that you can find at Walmart or Tiffanys. It may sometimes seem like a chore that you had to add in to your rushed day. But, these will be your most treasured memories when they are up, and out wherever life has steered them.

You can be sure that this “older” Mom and Dad are missing those times now when the “kids” call between going here or there leaving us with conversations planned when we heard from them again. Also, out-of-town or in-town, their world is still about them. If

you want their undivided attention avoid not your health challenges.

At least, we have those memories of holding them close and hearing their giggles when we played tickle. And we'll never forget being at the dining room table playing Monopoly for hours and hours because them begged to play it again. Those video replays in our mind of when we were all together will bring us warm smiles until the grandchildren finally get here.

Judy Atkinson

Dear Reader,

Life in a house full of kids can be challenging and exciting. At the time of this story, my five grandchildren ranged from 2 years to 13 years. The oldest is a boy who loves "critters", especially the creepy, crawly kind. He had one king snake and one tarantula and aspired to be a "bug guy" when he grew up. The youngest kids are twin 2-year olds, a boy and a girl. The only girl in the group of football playing, dirt bike riding, always wrestling boys, I always thought she would be a little tomboy, but noooooo, she's a little princess, diva who loves pink, ruffles, shoes, jewelry, doing her hair and putting on makeup. At two years old! Anyway, she also loves "critters" and was fascinated with her oldest brother's snake and spider. My daughter, who worked nights, would try to sleep during the day while her husband was "Mr. Mom" to the four younger kids who were not in school yet. One day as she was trying to sleep, she kept hearing her husband yelling at the kids. After trying to block out the noise unsuccessfully for what she said felt like hours, she finally gave up and came out of the bedroom to see what was going on. My cute, innocent little granddaughter had opened the lid to the snake's tank and it was out and loose in the house! My son-in-law and the other kids were scared of the snake so it was total pandemonium. They finally located the missing snake under one of the beds and my daughter, who had seen her son handle the snake enough that she was comfortable picking it up, managed to get it safely back in the tank. Everyone calmed down and my daughter went back to bed. That afternoon when the oldest son returned home from school and all the kids had a turn in telling him what went on, my daughter told him to be glad it was the snake that got out and not the tarantula. She told him if the spider ever gets out he will be history because she's totally afraid of spiders. My grandson still has the tarantula and two snakes three years later. The king snake got out again recently, but that's a story for another day!

Susan Bruckhoff

Dear Reader,

When I turned 40, I laughed at a card that said, "After 40, it's patch, patch, patch!"

When I turned 50, I smiled when my mother said that her 50s were her best years.

When I turned 60, I couldn't believe it! Who were all those old people at my class reunion?

When I turned 65, my mother died and I cried.

Now, I'm 67 and my daughter just turned 40. How can this be?

And why does that woman in the mirror look so much like my mother?

And why do my feet hurt?

Oops, I'm getting ahead of myself.

First, let me say that I have come to the conclusion that we are all victims of crumbling infrastructures; the older we get, the more parts need to be repaired or replaced.

Now, let me tell you about my feet.

Earlier this summer when I put on a pair of snazzy black sandals (low-heeled, of course), I looked down and noticed that two of my toes looked funny, actually downright peculiar. One of them seemed to be trying to get away from the rest.

I thought ... this should NOT be. Toes should stay in place ... and reasonably close together, don't you think? At first I wasn't overly concerned; but as the days and weeks went by, the two toes got farther apart. To my chagrin, I kept noticing an increasingly-widening V-shape between two little white toes on top of the black background of my favorite sandals.

I'd never had rebellious toes before ... but I'd never been 67 before either. What does an old lady do with runaway toes?

After increasing discomfort, I relented and saw a doctor. Subsequent visits to two podiatrists confirmed the same diagnosis: neuroma or nerve damage.

And (I kid you not!) there's a name for it: Sullivan's Sign.

Yup, Sullivan's **SIGN** ... as the "V" in a **Peace Sign**.

So that explains why I have a **V** between my toes.

It's true; I'm falling apart. Help, help, my infrastructure really IS crumbling!

The good news (according to my pastor-husband) is that now when we look down at my toes, we can sing that old Sunday School song from our childhood: "**V** is for Victory!"

Victory? Give me victory over those renegade toes.

Sharon Henthorn Carns

Dear Reader,

Looking for Love in all the Wrong Places

I'm a single woman of a certain age; I'd like some male companionship in my sunset years. From my experience, and those of my single friends, on-line dating has its pitfalls. I've discovered that men's on-line profiles are a study in "embellishing" the statistics -- namely their height, weight, age and marital status. If a man says he is 5' 8", he will be looking me in the eye -- and I'm only 5'4". I dated an alleged 65 year old man but during our date he revealed his college graduation years that made him at least a decade older. Not that I care about his exact age, but why not state the facts?

I can appreciate the impulse to embellish the facts. If it's true that "60 is the new 40", men don't believe it. In my experience, men who are 60 are looking for a 40-year old woman. Where's the common experience? A 40 year old woman wasn't alive when either Kennedy was assassinated. But what seems to be important to older men is having young "arm candy" rather than common values or conversation.

Another hurdle: men devoid of female influence will go for decades without changing their wardrobe. A case in point: I recently had a blind date for the Symphony, and imagine my surprise when my date was wearing a lime green leisure suit with bright blue top stitching that clearly was purchased before Nixon left office. (Or it could have been a donation to *Goodwill* during the Reagan years.) Complimenting this outfit were white patent leather shoes I had only previously seen in Florida. While every other man was wearing a tux, this man stood out like a bull-frog at a Cotillion. He hadn't had a haircut during the past two Bush administrations. Although completely bald on top, his sparse hair cascaded from just above his ears to well below his shoulders with a few limp strands combed over the top and shellacked in place. If he had a single female relative, they would have been compelled to urge him to get a haircut.

The sad fact is that even our green-clad friend had his choice of female companions as older men are in short supply. What's a woman to do?

Bonnie Storm

Dear Reader,

Writing has taught me a lot of things.

Unfortunately, some of them are flat-out ridiculous.

I'm one of those closeted weekend writers, but I've gotten used to squeezing creative thoughts into every free moment I have.

I compose and reanalyze sentences in the shower, and fume over plot problems while brushing my teeth. I hash out dialogue while watering the plants or grilling dinner on the porch. I list off character traits while I walk from the parking lot to my office, and I work out themes while driving around town. Then when I have time to plop myself in front of my computer, I always know where I'm going next. It's terribly effective.

But, there's a downside.

Recently, while cooking dinner on the porch, my roommate and I were chatting through the screen door. My next door neighbor (also out grilling), looked up in surprise when he heard my roommate respond.

I cocked my head at him, confused at his reaction.

"Oh!" He exclaimed, peering at me over his grill cover. "Sorry...It's just nice to hear you talking to another person for once." He smiled and turned his attention back to his hot dogs.

What could he mean?

I took a close look at myself as an outsider might see me. It was then that I realized two separate things, that, when combined, make little-ol' me look like a big, giant nut-job.

1. I tend to think verbally, and,
2. I talk with my hands.

While I was rewriting lines, an outside person would just see me blurting out statements, punctuating them with sweeping arm movements. While I worked on dialogue, someone else might think I was having an argument with myself--complete with angry gestures. Just picture it. Me, jabbing a hose accusingly at my herb garden, crying out "How dare you!", as I imagined my protagonist confronting her foe. Me, counting on my fingers as I decided that a character was "popular, cocky, and afraid of standing too close to the tuba section in band class."

And the constant muttering at half-cooked hamburgers, freshly scrubbed dishes, and my steering wheel. Ugh.

It's embarrassing, but at least I'm making progress on my YA novel...

Plus, I've finally figured out why I get toothpaste all over my bathroom mirror.

Emily Flemming

Dear Reader,

LIVING IN PITTSBURGH

She lives in the house we all grew up in. Across from our elementary school. Down the street from our church. Our names still written behind the medicine cabinet door, above hooks where our toothbrushes hung.

She keeps me informed on who is divorced, on who is cheating, and who *got heavy*. Who never had kids, whose kids get in trouble. Who still lives at home, and isn't paying.

She says living in Pittsburgh is like being in a bad relationship--people only talk about what is wrong. What they don't have, what they wish they'd done. About how good it "used" to be.

She started listening to Country music because she said her life feels like one of their songs. She wishes making dinner was like buying dog food--all in one bag just emptied into bowls. And that Girl Scouts should sell something you need: toilet paper, bread, a gallon of milk. Instead of those same stale cookies.

She showed me how to ride a bike without training wheels--her hand on the back of the seat. She taught me how to tell time, saving me from Mrs. Pacific and 4th grade public humiliation. She was bossy and funny and smarter than me, and I couldn't wait to get away.

She wonders why I don't call, why I don't visit more. She frets over who I've become. She wants us to be the way that we were--two comical inseparable sisters, sharing the same double bed.

She is my oldest sister, her hand always dragging me back, calling me home. Telling me...*just think about it.*

Jennifer E. Sams

Dear Reader,

It is September and my mind wanders back in time when I was going to school. It was the beginning of the school year and it was so full of promise. New teachers, new friends, new books. It was such an exciting time. New adventures were in store for me at every turn.

The first day of school was also very scary. Will my new teacher be nice or have the personality of a grouch? As I went through the grades, I had a teacher for each subject. On that first day, you would bring the basics, a loose leaf binder full of loose leaf paper or a bunch of spiral books. Some pens and pencils. Then you would be given a list, usually quite long, of things you had to get for the term. Protractors, calculators, highlighters, and

other essentials. My mother would take me to the local stationery store to get these things. When the class gets all the supplies, we are ready to start our term's work. New facts, new stories, new things to memorize.

On the second day of the new school term someone would bring a box of books to the class. These were our books for the term. We had to bring them home and cover them. I can remember the college brand book covers. These were the schools that we would eventually strive to get into. Then there was the old standby, the brown paper bag. I would cut the bag down to size to fit the book.

I knew that during the year I would have many journeys and adventures. In history I would go back in time and see what it was like in the olden days, the Revolutionary War, the Civil War and any other time. In math I would learn to calculate everything under the sun and including the sun. In science I would study animals and the earth and the way things work. What glorious adventures I have ahead of me!

I often think that way about a new writing project that I am going to start. It is nice to know there are still new frontiers to conquer.

It is with this thought that we start a new week of reading!

Thanks for reading with me.

Linda Cacaci

Dear Reader,

I quit my job a year ago and it's been a fantastic roller coaster ride ever since.

I know a lot of you are shaking your heads. In this economy? What could you be thinking? It's a thought that's run through my own head more than once. But it seemed like I'd spent enough time in my life working mostly for the money. I wanted to follow my passion for once and see how the money would shake out.

It hasn't been a resounding success so far. But I wouldn't change a thing. It's funny, when I told co-workers and friends what I was planning to do, many seemed to think that it was just a short sabbatical and I'd be back in a few months. My boss asked me whether I'd consider taking my old job back at the start of the new year. And the side of me that's practical and pragmatic really agonized over the decision.

But as you know from reading the beginning of this column, I said no. I said no to a regular paycheck. I said no to a job that seemed to shackle me more than give me wings.

I said yes to a volunteer project in southern Mexico, sleeping in a makeshift hut under mosquito netting, taking showers out of a bucket, and waking at 6 am to prepare breakfast and get the camp ready for the day. I didn't like every single day. I'm still not much of a

morning person, but watching the ocean waves roll in and the sun rise and knowing that I'd soon be headed out scuba diving made it a lot easier. And by the end of each day, I'd feel renewed.

Now that I'm back home, I realize how much more calmer and focused I've become; less concerned about the future. I used to feel so restless, wanting to go somewhere and do something, but not knowing what I was looking for.

I still don't have all the answers, often feeling twinges of self doubt and wondering if I'll be successful on my new path. Somehow these moments resolve themselves and I feel a peaceful sense of purpose. It's something I hope I feel for the rest of my life.

Sally Jones

Dear Reader,

As she sat there, holding a jar filled with money, I asked her what she would do with it, if it was hers to spend however she liked.

She didn't hesitate. "I would buy all the Barbies in the world," she stated with a smile.

Later, we would learn that jar held \$4,119. Not enough to buy all the Barbies in the world, but enough to help her family with the expenses they had and would incur since Ashtyn's diagnosis of bone cancer – osteosarcoma – back in July. Ashtyn is eight years-old.

Yesterday, I witnessed hundreds of people donate their money and time to help a sick, little girl. Many did not even know her or her family. The jambalaya cook-off and lunch plate dinner was a huge success because of the caring and compassion of so many people. Even the weather was in cooperation for the event; the storms that had threatened all day held off until 30 minutes after everything had been cleared away.

I was, on this day, witness to the best of mankind. It is, in fact, one of its most brilliant aspects: how we help others in times of need. There is something magnificent in human nature that causes us to go out of our way to help even complete strangers in times of crisis.

Yesterday, I got to witness that awesome power of charity and compassion firsthand. Not only did it kindle a spark in my heart, it did much towards renewing my often frayed faith in humanity.

Shanna Riley

Dear Reader,

Clunker Time

That beautiful, comfortable, mostly reliable, easily spotted in large parking lots, but 10-year-old car is not a clunker. Is it?

Rain is expected and errands must be run. Four out of five chores are finished and sky blackens as hard rain falls with lightning flashes and strikes everywhere. Drive home with serious water in streets, viaducts closed, detours. Car starts missing, jerking, engine light comes on. Think it is rain related but go directly to dealer for assessment. Bad coil or something. Car fixed. \$260. Curiously ask salesman if car qualifies as clunker. Unbelievably, yes! Buy a new car now?

Husband researches and wants a particular type. Gasp! Not a Ford! Set off to new dealer which has exact car desired (except for color). Admire, test drive, negotiate. Problem. Last year's registration which is required with Cash for Clunkers program has been discarded. No proof of registration last year. Had no car accidents, no tickets but many years' evidence that the car has been insured. No good. Nothing to do but go to DMV to get proof.

It's 5:30 on Friday. One day until dealer's expiration on clunker offer. Salesman says it takes 4 days for DMV to fax registration. Buy car anyway without clunker offer but with trade-in. Allow old car to live on. Extract promise from salesman to rewrite contract on Saturday (saves \$2000) if proof of registration is obtained.

A few DMVs are open on Saturday morning. First one driven to is not a full service facility. Sent to one 36 miles away. City driving. Shopper's traffic. 60 minutes left until noon closing. Long line. Unfriendly faces. My turn. Registration will be faxed to dealer and is expected to be there in 2 hours.

Afternoon slips away while waiting at dealer for fax to arrive. 2:30. Manager shows newly arrived fax ordered 4 days ago by another customer. Says mine will not come today. Call DMV and ask. Yell at manager. Fax miraculously comes at 3:30. Manager says wait 5 minutes for new papers to be drawn up. 7:30. New contract ready. 5 minutes to sign papers.

Total time to buy the new car: 12 hours over 2 days!

Beverly Suhr

Dear Reader,

This Labor Day weekend I found myself in a melancholic mood cleaning out the kitchen cabinets. Change is hard, and although this change was precipitated by an event that occurred three years ago, since things are now final it adds a twist to the grieving process. So I decided to do a thorough cleaning of the kitchen cabinets. Oh the things that I found. Hmm, I didn't know I had so many straws. Those would have come in

handy a month ago when my son had stitches on his face. I put those in the keep pile. My next discovery was orphan Tupperware lids. I've somehow managed to accumulate a garbage sack full of these lids. I think it's time to give up hope of them being adopted. A whole drawer full of garbage bag twisty ties. Will I ever use them all? How did they multiply? Anyone know of a craft project for twisty ties? I had a floor full of mismatched bowls and quite the obstacle course in the kitchen while I was undertaking this cleaning project. But now I have drawers and cabinets that sparkle. It helps to see the progress that I made in this small area of my life, it reminds me that sometimes you have to make a mess before you see success.

Cindy Keneipp

Dear Reader,

Being a homemaker, my days were relatively routine and uneventful until our adventurous cat, Maggie, joined our family. Now my days are unpredictable and uncontrollable with messy mishaps, silly antics, and surprise attacks. I never know what is about to unfold until I am engulfed in total chaos.

One morning I was in the middle of taking my bath when suddenly a horrible squalling from Maggie interrupted my relaxation time. I jumped from the tub and ran dripping to the kitchen to find my husband being bitten and clawed while he was attempting to rescue Maggie from the washing machine lid (which I forgot to close) that fell on and trapped her foot while she was exploring. She wasn't hurt, but my husband required some band-aids and he still laughs about the incident and says that she could have at least pretended to be grateful for his helping her.

Maggie is funny, sassy, and at times has a rebellious attitude that would make a teenager jealous. She also holds grudges. After being chased by my friend's two young sons, she spent the duration of their visit in hiding and to this day if she hears one of their voices even on the speaker phone, she hisses.

Since her arrival into my life, my household duties have expanded as I find myself defending the poor and defenseless house plants, repairing mini blinds, picking up knocked over items, cleaning up shredded paper, and getting my furry little friend out of places she has no business being in.

We adopted Maggie as a baby a year and half ago. My mother had died of cancer two years before and my dad had died of congestive heart failure that year, so I was feeling down and my husband and I adopted Maggie to help lift our spirits. She has helped me through a very depressing time in my life by keeping me busy, making me laugh, and sharing her love.

Every day with Maggie is an adventure!

Janet Green

Dear Reader,

I love the title Stepmom.

Women from my mom's generation vigorously tell me, "You're a Mom," "You're the Other Mom," or "You're a Co-Mom" whenever the subject comes up, as if Stepmom is a curse or four-letter word.

But for me, this 7-letter word perfectly captures the wonderful, crazy, insane world that is my life.

You see, three years ago, I traded my cool, single-chick, I'm-always-in-control world for marital bliss with the man of my dreams and his blonde-headed, blue-eyed 4-year-old daughter.

And now, after three years, millions of prayers and more batches of chocolate-chip cookies than I can count, not only have my stepdaughter and I formed a strong bond through cooking, but her mother and I talk, her younger brother occasionally comes over, and her dad and I are making our marriage work and building our family.

It's a crazy rollercoaster, waking with sunshine smiles in the morning, facing scattered showers of tears in the afternoon, and ending with sunsets wreathed in hugs and I love yous. During the week we're still newlyweds, enjoying the freedom that comes from not having children around. On the weekends and in the summer, we're full-time parents, cooking, cleaning, playing and trying to match her boundless energy.

And yes, while she's with us, I am Mom. I love her as my own, determined to care for her the best I can, making good memories and praying God forgives and fixes my mistakes.

But she has her own Momma, a wonderful one, and I do not want to replace her; I don't try.

Stepmom is who I am, a Mom stepping in to fill the gap and treasuring every "I love you" that my beautiful, musical, intelligent, wonderful, Stepdaughter sends my way.

I love the title Stepmom!

Thank you for reading with me.

Blessings on you and yours,

Erin Tunnell

Dear Reader,

Have you ever said to yourself "I am turning into my mother"? For me, these traits and mannerisms are bittersweet. As a teenager, I was not the well behaved child that every mother dreams of. Don't get me wrong, I was not a criminal or drug addict but I was very headstrong and had what I would now consider a smart mouth. I thought I knew it all and can recall my daily rants with hands on my hips when my mother disagreed with me. How I now wish I would have done more listening than talking. I eventually grew up and out of the smart mouth period thank goodness and left the nest to attend college and beyond. My mother was always there. When I was in college, she would meticulously launder all the dirty clothes I dragged home on weekends. She was there when I got married. She was there when I had my only child.

Holding my newborn son was probably the happiest I ever saw her. She helped me take care of him sacrificing sleep and sanity through colic. When my son was about six months old, my mother became extremely tired. It only took one trip to the doctor for her to be sent directly to the hospital. My mother had leukemia, not the chronic type but the kill you in a day type. It was devastating and the first time in my life that I truly had to take care of myself. She was so brave through all the treatments and a bone marrow transplant. However, when my son was about two years old, she lost her fight. I was only twenty-nine years old and motherless. I am so thankful that I hear her voice everyday in my head when I scold my son or give my opinion to someone. I am so glad that some of her advice was embedded in my brain even when I was not aware that I was listening. So next time you groan and say "I'm turning into my mother" consider the blessing it is. Someday, it may be a daily reminder as it has been for me.

Leanne Condrey

Dear Reader,

Several years ago I began to read your five-minute reads. I enjoyed them and purchased books regularly. Then I found I was focusing on the Dear Reader column as much as the reads themselves. Steadily I felt encouraged to write my own thoughts and kept a journal. In a conversation with an old friend, I mentioned how important she had been to me at different times in my life and how much I appreciated her.

She later wrote me a letter about how critical my thoughts and appreciation of her had been. She had been very down and feeling so unimportant and when she thought about the things I had said and later written to her, she felt lifted and that it had meant the world to her to know someone appreciated her. I was inspired.

Not long after, I read another of Suzanne's Dear Readers about how important a visit with her grandparents had been. I realized I had never really thanked my mother's brother for all of the visits over all of the summers I had spend on their farm. I dutifully decided to write that story. I wrote about the "chores" I was expected to do, the pies my aunt made using the apricots I gathered, the adventures of crawling in the hay loft and my daily horseback ride. I reflected on how I knew my uncle must have been tired after a day of

work and yet he always took the time to saddle up Trigger and take me for walks around the barn yard since he always felt the horse would not behave for a kid. How he never said no to my requests for "one more time".

I showed the story to my mom who passed it on to my cousin, since my uncle had already died. He was completely stunned that those times his dad had spent that extra time had meant so much to me. He commented that his dad always thought I was so absorbed in getting my rides that he couldn't disappoint me. He was tired when we walked, but since he had never had a daughter to do things with, he kind of enjoyed those rides and visits.

He thanked me for reminding him of his dad's "softer side" and for letting him know that those times were as special to me as to his dad.

That was an encouragement for me to write yes, but more importantly to share! I thank Suzanne for that gift as well as the gift of "reading with friends".

Rita Pierini

Dear Reader,

This may sound strange, but "back to school" is one of my favorite times of the year. Second only to Halloween. This is not due to reasons one would expect, as I have no children which I am relieved to see returning to school. Also, now that I am a "grown up", this time of year does not signal any change in my routine. This time of year triggers fond memories from my childhood.

Maybe I was an odd child, but I doubt that I was the only kid that was excited about the return to school. There were new school supplies to be purchased, new friends to be made and old ones to reunite with, new teachers, and sometimes even a new school. Each fall provided a chance to reinvent myself ... to start over from scratch. All it takes now to take me back is the unmistakable scent of crisp fall air, the leaves changing from green to gold, and the stacks of school supplies being sold at almost every store.

Maybe I could use some new pencils, for old times sake.

Coralie Kuhn

Dear Reader,

A friend dropped by my office to see me last week and offered me a wonderful compliment. He said he looked forward to my Facebook posting every day, more than anyone else's, as it was always so upbeat and positive. He wondered how I could be so positive; I wondered how I couldn't?

As a single mom with two medically-challenged teenage boys, I have found that every day is, in itself, a challenge. Added to that, my dad passed away earlier this year and my mom has been quite dependent ever since. I feel so bad for her, the grief that she struggles through every day and the overwhelming fog that has seemed to completely encompass her mind; the once pillar-of-strength is only now a flicker.

Almost daily in my life, I know that something is going to happen, plans are going to go awry, and emergencies are going to creep in, but I also know that when it does, I'll handle it. I'm not full of confidence, or of myself, but what choice do I have? It is so easy to allow ourselves to become distressed in the events of our lives, that our lives can pass us by before we know it. I can't control what life has given me, but I can control how I handle it.

My structure and support system is ME, so I try to keep it running on a full tank. I start each and every day with a SMILE, not always because I want to, but because I have to. I have found that it only adds to my burden if I'm not in a positive mood, and why should I be my own worse enemy? I face things head-on and try to maintain a positive attitude to get through them. So, if my Facebook posts bring a bright spot to someone else's day, that's a bonus!

So, if just getting out of bed today was a chore for you and you think you could use a break--stop, take a deep breath, and allow yourself to change. Waking up is a blessing and we're given it first thing every day. Take a moment to realize how blessed you are. The rest of your life will then fall into place.

Cindy Thompson

Dear Reader,

There I sat listening as my peers complained about The Executive Office – “They don’t train us and can’t get reports to us on time; how do they expect us to do our jobs and how dare they yell at us for doing it wrong or getting it done late when they don’t tell us how to do it right and can’t get information to us on time!” It’s not my nature to futilely sit around complaining, so I didn’t, though I confess I shared their concerns.

Fast forward several months... A problem solver by nature, I trained myself by researching and asking questions and put together a list of answers to frequently asked questions. I self-taught the software program used to pull the information we need. Now I can pull my own reports. Work is a lot less stressful now that I’m no longer relying on others to provide needed information.

My productivity took off like wildfire! Folks wanted to know what I was doing. I offered to share the FAQ’s and show my peers how to do the reports. Talk about unexpected responses!!!! I got flack from all ends of the game; my peers for making them look bad, Executive for bypassing their reporting system, and my boss for taking the accountability away from the Executive Department.

It appears not everyone wants solutions to problems. I seem to have overlooked the joy and camaraderie my peers experienced in complaining. I misread the political game of enhancing authority and importance by withholding vital information. Finally, I overstepped the boundaries by focusing on the outcome instead of what's NOT in my job description.

Will the lessons I've learned change who I strive to be? Absolutely not! I don't aspire to mediocrity and I refuse to succumb to the pressure to do so. I simply find it amusing how contradictory we can be sometimes.

It's so good to read with friends!

Karen Mabe

Dear Reader,

My Mother, bless her soul, used to say "If you can read, you can accomplish anything." In my long life and I discovered this to be so true.

I remember as a very small girl each of my night time rituals would end with her reading me a story. My Favorites were Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass. Mom said that sometimes she would be so tired that she would try to skip a page or two but I always caught her at this trick and made her go back to read the skipped parts.

I ALWAYS have a book in my car, just in case I have to wait at the Dentist, Doctor or after school, while waiting to pick up my Granddaughter. I ALWAYS read at least 1 hour before I close my eyes at night, even when I was working full time and a full time Mom. Now that I am retired and a Grandmother, I even spoil myself most morning and read for half an hour or more before starting my day. I also carry on the tradition of reading to my Grandchildren when I am lucky enough to be able to put them to bed at night.

I have been though the usual ups and downs of life and some not so usual. I lost my 29 year old son 15 years ago to a brain tumor and that was one of the few times in my life when I was unable to read. Severe depression does funny things to your ability to concentrate. After that battle with depression got a little better I volunteered for our local Friend's Of The Library in various Board positions and then founded and now Chair our Library Foundation.

There was a book out several years ago by Catherine Ryan Hyde called Pay it Forward. I did not know it but that was what I was doing with my life and work for our Library. Books have brought me so much pleasure and ability to forward my working career that I feel compelled to "Pay It Forward" in my life's work with the library. I hope that every child has the opportunity to be seduced by books at a young age like I was. What a better world it would be.

Linda L. Bankard

Dear Reader,

OLD FRIEND

I didn't hear him come up behind me. I was thinking about him and wishing I had showed up yesterday but I had a lot of homework to do and wasn't finished until after dark. Sitting now on the rocky ground, with my back to the fence, I waited. I know he'll come. I had a small apple in my pocket I carried all day. Maybe he smelled it? Suddenly, I feel hot breath on my neck, feel him snuffle my hair, and hear him snort, "I'm here!". I jump up, turn around and reach to hug my old friend.

Joe is like no other horse. I know that. He's about fifteen-hands high, built sturdy, bay colored, white star markings on his nose, a great-looking quarter horse. He's owned by an old gentleman whose family farmed the land years ago. In fact, our plot was once part of those farm lands. Joe was a pony then and there were cows and goats and other horses to nibble grasses and keep him company. They're all gone now, but Joe. Most days, he's there waiting by the fence when I come home, other times he sees me and comes right over. We keep each other company.

When we walk side-by-side, it is magical. I tell him my day, he listens, snorts, or nods, shakes his head, we munch on carrot or apple; Joe's a comfort. We're pals and I pretend he's my very own horse. I hop on and we gallop down the fence and back, mane and tail and pony tail flying in the wind. I keep a little box with pick and brush by the corner fence and like to pat and groom him down, pick his hooves and comb his tail. I know he likes the brushing and I love to do it, too. It's our time to talk.

Ever since I heard Dad say the old farmer died, I've been worried about Joe and pretty sad. I asked Dad, "What'll happen to Joe?" Tonight, he said I don't need to worry anymore. Joe is going to a bigger pasture and there're other horses. Dad said the old farmer had made arrangements awhile back; he loved Joe, too. I'll never forget our time together. Thank you, Joe, old friend.

Barbara Lamb

Dear Reader,

Who are we?

He began to be there in her teens; he was there to help comfort when a seventeen year old girl was going through tough times, the worst of which was a dying mother.

He was there through two marriages, one unsuccessful, and remained patient as she traveled, but always came back to him. She even brought new friends into the circle, but he stayed steadfast in his devotion.

She was there the second longest; she was supportive through years of losses, and the woman's declining health, but also there for the joyous times, like her graduation from college as a senior citizen. She was the first of her variety. The others had been different. Because she was the first of her category, the lady had a new appreciation for her. She could enjoy different events than the ones with her previous buddies.

Now: *I* am here, the second of the newer associates; I continue to keep the tradition alive: This is to protect, comfort, love and help keep her days happy through her future endeavors, no matter what they may be.

Who are we? We are the loving pets; cats and dogs that are faithful to our people through the good times and the dire ones. We never ask for much; just food, attention, water, and a warm bed.

We are the one constant.

Cindy Eldredge

Dear Reader,

It all began to mushroom: The paint on the outside of our house started peeling, the screen door didn't close right, the bathroom my husband spackled years ago was still not done, the bottom of the garage door was eaten away from moisture. I could go on and on, but why bore you when you probably have to-do lists of your own?

My husband used to take care of all these things himself; then age set in. Ah, lovely old age with its illnesses and drain of energy that we took for granted in earlier years. So I patiently waited year after year while my husband said "we'll get to it", as other more pressing things cropped up, like doing taxes, visiting doctors, family functions and other day-to-day occurrences. As in the past when purchasing or fixing something, my husband's comment was always that it would take time to research for the right painter and someone to do the other jobs.

Then one day an angel by the name of Freddie showed up at our door. I didn't know at the time that he was an angel so I asked my husband, "Who was at the door?" He said, "It was some guy who wanted to know if we want our house painted and I told him 'yes'". I couldn't believe my ears; an on-the-spot, quick decision from my husband, who usually asked a million questions and required reams of paperwork before he'd agree to any job being done. Now, I was the hesitant one.

But, I needn't have been, because Freddie turned out to be a sweet guy who, along with his crew, not only painted our house on the outside, but spackled and painted the

bathroom, regouted its floor, fixed the garage door, and even threw in some freebies, such as fixing our back door and the front screen door! Freddie's angel must have been watching him, because, after seeing our house, three of our neighbors hired him.

So things mushroomed in a good way. The only problem now is about the rest of the jobs that have to be done around the house, like new carpeting. My husband said they'll get done, but they need research. Oh, well, maybe another angel will show up at our door with some swatches!

Jessica D'Alessandro

Dear Reader,

Lately, whenever life threatens to overwhelm me, I've found myself murmuring, "This, too, shall pass." It's a little wishful mantra of hope, a reminder that whatever the current stressful situation, it will soon be only a memory. A long dreaded appointment for dental work arrives, is (mercifully) quickly over, and life moves on. The chronic illness of a loved one, lingering here but not really with us, is heart-wrenching to bear, but in the end her suffering will cease, and life for those of us who remain will again move on. My almost-college student spreads his turmoil about grades and graduation and choosing dorms, but I bite my tongue, since he'll be gone before I know it and life will go on.

But lately I've been wondering if I'm not going about this all wrong. I've started to think that maybe pain, suffering, and grief, even as they are unavoidable parts of life, should not be meaningless interludes to be whisked quickly away. They have lessons to teach, if I'm willing to listen and learn.

What if, instead of attempting to rush through the trying times, I embraced them? Maybe bridges and caps and root canals are shouting, "Slow down, take better care of yourself!" Maybe my aunt's slow decline should jolt me into remembering that time is short and life is fleeting, and I should connect with my dear ones now, not wait for tear-filled bedside scenes. And my son? He's grown so tall, so adult, and he's heading out to his own life so quickly, shouldn't I get to know this new young man while I can? Through all of these anxieties, I'd still emerge on the other side, life would still move on, but perhaps I'd be living it as a wiser woman.

So now while I'm waiting for unpleasantness to pass, I'll also try to be less impatient, to pay more attention to the quiet voices hidden among life's stresses. All of them, the petty anxieties and the life-changing transitions, hold secrets that if unlocked, may help me both to survive the moment now and to cherish its memory and meaning in quieter future days.

Barbara Taylor

Dear Reader,

On this planet there are nations. In the United States of America there are universities. One can notice an university the moment when starting the womb process. A life can be experienced there. A way of life can be seen there. At a university you are supposed to prove you can live. Classes and social functions are important at an university. How you accomplish those two is supposed to reflect your noted performance. There can be more than classes and social events. You should probably note if there is forward motion of life on an university.

A man. He takes his courses. He tries to look decent. He keeps going and he keeps directed. Those around him note him. He graduates in the late 60's. He later becomes the president of that university.

A woman. She is noted and later she can see that someone strives not to try her course in life at the same university the same way. She actually works in the same areas as her. She is not threatened by her. She has obtained a status.

This man and this woman cross paths. They make a notation at the same university. Campus life can reflect them. A young embryo actually knows of them. They have that campus experience even if it was difficult to make it seem important. A couple decades later these two get a frontal attack against them. The campus experience is suddenly seen on an obvious important. The person that witnessed the attack was that embryo at one time who noticed their university and them. And since that time that woman who was an embryo seen it vividly waits for the woman and himself. He would be able to see that it was an attack on the system. And then only then it is when you saw the two for what it was and is. They successfully created a college history they worked off of and on by becoming a couple at a good university to preside over it.

They are certainly seen as a couple. They started looking like a couple towards the end of their college career. By him identifying the attack on social structure he makes certain they always will be seen as a couple and from that late 60's time to the future events. The witness to there life can certainly identify them with their university.

Jenny Rebecca Thompson

Dear Reader,

One of the key tips for memorizing is repetition, yet it's funny as we reminisce, often, the repetitive things in our past are almost completely forgotten, and it is single occurrences that we remember most. Sometimes the simplest interaction can completely change the course of your life, or shift your perspective. It is funny how such important lessons can come from the simplest events.

I had one of those moments when I was four. My mother had given me blocks for my birthday. They were the only thing I really wanted, and I had wanted them since I was two. I was learning how to stack them really high with unusual architecture, and I

discovered how to know the bottom ones out from under the whole construction without toppling the entire building. I was so proud of my accomplishment, that I couldn't wait to show my mother. I just knew she would be pleased.

She was reading, in the other room, and I tried to get her attention. In the meantime, I continued practicing. Waiting for her to take a moment seemed like forever. Finally, she came in and sat down. I rebuilt a towered structure, and quickly passed my hand under it taking out the foundation blocks. The tower shuddered, but was still standing. I did it again, and it toppled. I giggled and looked up at her for approval. Instead, she looked really sad, and she was slowly shaking her head, and I was completely taken off guard, as she softly said, 'Rachael, if you are going to do something with your time, do something constructive - not destructive.'

What wisdom. It made sense. It changed my life. It takes much less time and effort to destroy than it does to build. I only wish all children had a mother who had taught them this.)

Rachael Sutton

Dear Reader,

My first step into becoming a reader started with my grandfather and he also taught me to knit both of which I still do today. I would ask him what the sign said and that got me to figuring out the symbols had meaning that I could understand.

My second step in loving to read was my second grade teacher Miss Burlson, in 1942. She walked the whole class to our East Orange, NJ public library, which was part of the Andrew Carnegie matching grants for libraries. Every child got a library card. To me this was my ticket to the bigger world because my family were not reading lovers and therefore did not have books.

Miss Burlson also taught literature but in a subtle way. Each week we had to learn and recite a verse from Palms (that was in the days when bibles were still in schools.) Her other method was when the class was good (meaning attentive to lessons). She would read a chapter in "The Jungle Book". There must have been other books but the one I remember was the "The Jungle Book" On lovely days it was outside under a huge spreading maple tree.

I credit these two people for my love of reading. I cannot conceive of living any other way.)

Carol Murray

Dear Reader,

I have what many would call a large family: 8 children and 23 (so far) grandchildren. Most of the grandchildren live hundreds of miles away. Finances are a bit pressing, so my wife and I don't get to visit as often as we would like.

About seven or eight years ago, I started writing each of my married children a letter weekly to keep in touch. At first they were hand written, but before long became computer generated. When my first grandchild learned to read, I realized this was a golden opportunity to try to connect with him.

How many children get a personal letter today? How about a letter each week – personal and to only that child? For the past seven or so years, I have been writing a letter to each child who could read.

I kept the subjects fun for the child: my Army days, trucks, airplanes, buildings and such for the boys and other subjects for my granddaughters. Obviously many subjects are interesting to each. Along with the fun subject, I try to work in a moral or spiritual lesson for reinforcement of their parents training.

Occasionally, I will get a letter back from one of my grandchildren just as I do sometimes from my children. That is nice, but my real reward is knowing I am giving each child and grandchild a rare gift: a personal letter. It forms a bit of stability in a storm tossed world.

This summer, I have undertaken a new project. I decided to write some books set in one of the places where I grew up: the Ozark Foothills in the mid 50s. Of course, there is plenty of adventure, fun and naturally, moral lessons.

Is all of this a lot of work? Certainly. Are my children and grandchildren worth it? (That is the real question we sometimes don't want to ask.) Yes!

How about you? Do you have children, grandchildren or great-grandchildren who would love to get a weekly personal letter? You would be amazed what an influence you can have. Would your descendents (or even children you don't know) like to read fictionalized accounts of your "growing up" years? The answer is: Yes! The real question for you is, "Are they worth it?" Just do it.

Bill Burdick

Dear Reader,

Every month we had a day for writing in our poetry notebooks. She would write a title and the first two lines of a seasonal poem that we had composed together as a class on the blackboard. Then she allowed us time to finish the poem on our own and even compose more poems if we were inspired. She also encouraged us to decorate our poems with drawings and crayons, further encouraging us to realize that poetry was related to both art and color. Our October lines were something about black cats and pumpkins; we moved on through turkeys, Christmas trees and Easter bunnies, writing towards spring that year.

Mrs. Wells lived down the street from me in our small town. I rode my bike by her house when I pedaled down to the drugstore, and often on an autumn evening or a summer's early morning, I could catch her on her front porch reading the local paper. I would stop, she would invite me to sit in the wicker chair next to her, and we would talk about a book report, a poem, or the latest Cartwright adventure on the Bonanza saga. I know now what a sacrifice it was for her to spend her precious non-classroom time chatting with a child. However, at the time, she made me feel like she longed to hear my every word, that what I had to say was important. Thus, she made me feel important too.

While I never learned to scan a poetic line correctly or to hear iambic pentameter perfectly, I did learn to love the cadence of a rhythmic sentence, to relish a delightful metaphor, to appreciate a well-turned phrase. Those first fourth grade rhymes were just the beginning of a love for poetry and literature. Now when I want rest from the world, I wrap myself in a comforting story and use a poem for a pillow.

Claudia Mundell

Dear Reader,

Did you ever go on a wild search for something your child lost that would be hard to replace? Parenting 101 says never put things on top the car, but my husband put my son's shoes there and didn't remember till he got to the restaurant. Three year olds do not take well to lost shoes and wearing a new pair. We had tried two other pairs unsuccessfully before finding these. I quickly volunteered to go back by my in-laws and search for the original pair and since my husband was closer to the mall he decided to go try to find another pair. My mother and I headed off to my retrace the shoes last steps. On our first pass we didn't see anything, so we turned around in the driveway and headed back the route my husband would have taken. Suddenly I saw something in the road. It wasn't road kill, it was a lost shoe. The song Dead skunk in the middle of the road came to mind. My mother stopped and put her flashers on so that I could go pick it up. I wondered what good one shoe would do me if I didn't find the other? Would Leo have to learn to hop? Luckily we found the other shoe on the sidewalk a few houses up. The problem there was that the homeowner had hosted a dinner party and 8 or 10 guests were leaving as we spotted the shoe on the curb and rolled to a stop. Ever so helpful the homeowner asked if I needed directions. I did my best to say without laughing "no I need that shoe over there on the curb." As luck would have it my husband found a second pair at the mall so now we keep a pair in the car at all times.

Jennifer Doyle

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