

Dear Suzanne and Fellow Readers,

By the end of September, I'll have passed my 61st birthday. My hubby and I have been married 37 years. Our three sons, ages 36, 31 and 27, are gradually growing up. We have two grandsons, 10 and 7. Yes, they are the light of Grandma's life! I have a career that I love in an academic library. This being September, I am starting another year at the university, my 35th. Life hasn't been all sunshine and light, but by and large, mine has been rich and fulfilling. There is only one thing missing--a baby girl.

I always wanted a daughter, but God didn't see fit to answer that prayer. When I saw the ecstatic look on my husband's face when our first son was born, I was more than happy to have had a baby boy. But, with each subsequent pregnancy, the yearnings would begin anew. My third pregnancy was so radically different from the other two, I was convinced a little girl was on the way, but again a son was born.

I always thought that girls were not sent my way because I couldn't tie fancy bows and secretly detested stuck-up, catty little girls. I didn't mind spending money on GI Joe's and Star Wars toys, but could I be comfortable buying Barbie's? I didn't think so. Being the mother of sons really suited me. We lived the school years moving from football, into basketball, and wrapping up with baseball. One tried soccer and one tried lacrosse. I loved to go to all the games and cheered loudly even though I knew the boys ignored my sideline ranting. I dealt calmly with broken fingers, stitches, so-so report cards and teenage scrapes with local law enforcement in numerous jurisdictions.

After crossing my fingers through my first daughter-in-law's two pregnancies, we welcomed grandsons. Just being a grandmother soothed my disappointment that my hopes for a baby girl remained unfulfilled. But today "hope springs eternal," as my youngest son and his wife have announced that they are expecting in February. It will only be a few weeks now until the doctor can determine the baby's sex. At least I won't have to wait the entire term to know the outcome. Once again I am thinking pink!

Enjoy!

Marcy Milota

Dear Reader,

It was supposed to be a simple party. But the neighborhood block party became an event. One in which small children could ride their bikes freely in the road, one in which neighbors who have lived on the same street for 10 years finally met, one in which the thanks for bringing everyone together kept pouring in.

We have a small, quiet street, with a mix of kids and couples and old and young. For one day everyone cheered over how high Oreos were stacked. They ate popcorn provided by the shy neighbor who surprisingly had a large popcorn popper in his garage. They raced scooters and played tug-o-war. They talked smart and raised a few glasses. The adults even managed to surprise the kids with a barrage of silly string.

There was no garbage on the lawns because the kids really did listen and pick up after themselves. There was so much food, that leftovers gave way to an impromptu party the next day.

Now, we have funny e-mails among the neighbors about how we can't wait for next year. We have a 10 year old boy who proclaimed in the middle of that day "This is the best day of my life!" We have a sweet older gentleman who kissed his thanks with tears in his eyes about what a great day he had.

A simple party, indeed.

Joan Posch

Dear Reader,

Have you ever tasted the sweetness of a well-chosen word? Each time I sit down to read a book I have a first-class feast. There are over 700,000 words in the English language that can be use to dish up a delightfully delicious message!

If I could create a list of words that are not used often enough it would be a short list. It does not take 700,000 words to say something encouraging.

Make a list of words that you would like to hear more often. Look at the list that you have written. Do you have a list of 700,000 words or do you have a menu of words that you are hungering to hear again?

The most encouraging words that I have ever read have been written in one sentence.

Thank you.

These two words can be written in 700,000 different ways. Each one leaves a pleasant aftertaste on someone's palate. These are the ingredients. Short, and Sweet!

Confection-ately yours,

Sandi Keefer

Dear Reader,

"Mama, what should I do?" I ask her that question 20 times a day now, but she doesn't answer anymore. Or does she, in my memories? I need to be still and recall all those valuable lessons she taught me. I lost my dear mother four weeks ago tonight. My heart and soul ache to hear my mother's words of wisdom once again. She grew up in a family of nine kids, during the Great Depression of the 1930's. She learned how to be tough at an early age. While I stress out over the least little thing that goes wrong, she always looked on the bright side. I even played the old June Carter Cash song, 'Keep On the

Sunnyside' at her funeral service, because it seemed like such a fitting tribute. "Did you enjoy hearing it, Mama?"

"Mama, can you hear me? How I long to hear your sweet voice. How I long to feel your touch. Remember all those times when I pulled away from your embrace after I started wearing the back brace for scoliosis? I was so angry over my circumstances, and I took it out on you...but you never stopped giving me unconditional love. Mama, did you know how proud I was of you? You were 'just a housewife' in other people's eyes, but to me, you were the best mother ever. You worked day and night, taking such good care of Daddy and my brother...and me, your shy little bookworm. Thank you, Mama, for showing me the value and joy of reading. You were the smartest mom I knew, even with your eighth grade education. Your legacy lives on inside of me."

"Mama, did I thank you enough for everything you did for me my whole life? When you had the breathing ventilator in your mouth and couldn't talk in the ICU, I tried so hard to tell you all those things I'd neglected to over the years. Did you understand that I didn't know you were so sick, or I would've gotten you better medical care? We trusted your doctors to do no harm, but they failed you. How will I ever get past my anger over losing you before your time, Mama? You were so brave when the doctor asked if you knew there was no hope of you getting better, when you shook your head that you wanted to die. Thank you, Mama, for sparing me that agonizing decision to take you off life support. I hope you're in peace and without pain now, with Daddy and sweet Heidi (my dog)."

One more day. How I wish I had the chance to change a lot of things. She and I will meet again and have the most glorious reunion...because I won't be afraid to hug her and tell you how much I love her. But I suspect she knew all along.

Deanna Groves

Dear Reader,

I was a preschooler when my Mother walked me to my local library to apply for a library card. I thought it was the most marvelous place...though in fact it was a small cramped building located behind some retail shops across the street from the train station. But all I cared about was the fact that I could get new books every time I visited.

My first great ambition was to read all the books from A-Z in the children's section. I think I was at G when I realized that books were being added and books were being taken out and reshelved. It meant that I would never reach my goal. Oh, well!

When I started my work life, I was a radio dispatcher, a sales clerk, a waitress, a car salesperson, a passenger service agent for an airline and a teacher. But fate decided that I would end up working at the Library of Congress.

I fell in love with the Library shortly after I started working there. I loved her endless horde of books, her odd collections (such as the world's largest collection of baseball cards, a stringed instrument collection that includes a Stradivarius, powder horn maps from frontier days, and many other fantastic things.) She is an elegant lady adorned with fabulous mosaics and dressed in marble from many states. I heard famous authors, statesmen and poets speak in her halls.

Now that I am retired, I am a volunteer with the Master Gardener program. To help one of the people that I met there, I sometimes water the garden at our local library. While I am watering, I sometimes see out of the corner of my eye, a mother bringing her child to the library...and I smile to think that that was how it all began for me.

Rose Apter

Dear Reader,

I've always loved to read, and read voraciously as a child. There have been times in my life, though, when reading just didn't seem to fit, like when my children were small, and when I never seemed to have enough time. Reading never really seemed to mesh well with the men in my life, either. Neither of my exes liked to read, nor were they keen on the idea of me taking a little time for myself. One of the best things about being single again was being able to pick up a book and read anytime I felt like it. I had a long, long list of books that I had been waiting a long, long time to read.

Recently I've begun dating again, something I haven't done in a very long time. This man is actually a reader. What started out as getting to know you questions has really blossomed. An evening spent perusing my extensive reading wish list resulted in a box of 36 classic novels from his living room collection for me to borrow. Every now and then a conversation will lead to, "You need to read that" and book-by-book my library has grown. I have some serious work to do.

I've read his favorite; he's read mine. That led to watching a BBC miniseries version of my favorite book (what a gem!) I think he must be at least a little bit smitten to put up with a 10-hour movie based on a Jane Austen novel.

He has his favorite genres, and I have mine, so as we finish a book we've taken to mailing each other book reports to keep caught up on what the other has been reading. Even though we talk to and see each other just about every day, they're a nice little surprise to find in the mailbox, a sweet way to keep in touch.

His latest brilliant idea is that we find a book that we can read together, in addition to what we like to read on our own. Only, of course, after researching what might match a list of possibly still available BBC videos.

Keep your fingers crossed for me; I think this one is a keeper.

Kris Aasheim

Dear Reader,

As I looked through my notebook, I found this entry dated January 26, 2008, written about a month after I retired.

Have you ever noticed when you stay home for a while, you become aware of things you overlooked before? When you are busy getting ready for work, you tend to overlook things that are out of place.

As you hurry out the door, you may see something is amiss, but you don't have time to stop and fix it. You tell yourself, "I'll take care of it when I get home." After a full day at work, you come home tired and slightly bleary-eyed. All you want to do is relax for a few minutes, get something to eat, and do a few of the 'necessary' things. Then a few days later you notice the same thing again.

I have spent the last month trying to get things back in order in my home. I guess, I should say the first month of my retirement has been spent getting reacquainted with my home and the things therein.

It is amazing what you see when you spend whole days at home. Purging clutter is hard work. Things you have saved for whatever reason are in the way. What do you do with them? Where do they go?

It doesn't look like I get much done on any given day, but slowly a few things are completed. I am working on a routine. I don't know what it will turn out to be, but I am making headway in my sewing studio (When you have your own room you can call it a studio.). Yesterday, I did some more consolidating of boxes. I also did some donating!

Jeanne M. Samson

Dear Reader,

A nurse appeared at the hospital room door with a rolling cart. A row of babies wrapped tightly in white blankets lay on the top shelf, Just their tiny faces showing.

She checked something off on her clipboard and chose one of the babies. Here you are, she smiled, depositing it in my waiting arms. She turned and left, rolling the cart down the hall.

I'd never paid much attention to babies before, but here with my first born, the mothering hormones suddenly unfurled like banners in the wind. *I Am A Mother! I just did something important that will last a life time. I am no longer a silly just-out-of-high school girl.*

As I looked down at her little face I felt the love flowing out of me like a silver net, sliding around her and back into my heart, sealing us together forever. The imagery was so strong I knew something enchanting was happening and I was lost to everything else around us.

"Hi baby", I whispered. "I'm your mommy". It was a moment I would remember clearly half a century later.

Don't unwrap the baby was the admonishment the nurse had left with me, but I ignored her. I needed to see her tiny hands and feet...the dark hair they told me about. I began gently tugging at the blanket trying to find a loose end.

Suddenly the nurse loomed up at my bedside and I jumped in guilt. She quickly scooped the baby out of my arms.

“I...I...was just going to...” I stammered guiltily.

“I’m so sorry, wrong baby,” she said in a quick voice, and laid another tightly wrapped baby in my empty arms and hurried out the door.

Totally off balance, no one to talk to, I just stared at the strange baby.

A few hours earlier I had been someone with few responsibilities, no mothering instincts and no direction, but a grownup was emerging. I quickly, deliberately unwrapped this new child, ran my hands over her tiny body and inspected her pink beaded wrist band with her name. Then I leaned down close to her face so we shared the same breath as I whispered my love for her.

On the lighter side, she has been late to events all her life.

Saidra Kjolsing

Hello!

“Why do you own so many books?”

“Have you actually read them?”

“Why do you read so much?”

Do these questions sound familiar? They are to me, because I hear them frequently from family and friends. The second and third questions are easy for me to answer: yes I have read them, and I read because I enjoy reading. But what about the first question? Well...that’s a little more complicated.

I recently read Larry McMurtry’s aptly titled memoir, *Books: A Memoir*, and it made me realize that bibliophiles like myself reach a point where the books we own no longer only have meaning intrinsic to their content: we give them our own meaning. That is to say, we may not remember what the book is about, but we remember the day we purchased the book, or when and where we read the book.

Each time I walk up to my book shelves, I am reminded of happy memories. Memories of the wonderful museum visits I’ve made and the great works of art I’ve seen when I pass the shelves of exhibition catalogues. Gifts from friends, like Thomas Cahill’s *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, bring a smile to my face as I recall the fun times my friend and I have shared. Books remind me of vacations taken, like reading TJ Clark’s *The Painting of Modern Life* while staying at the Degas House in New Orleans, or spending nervous nights awake in the dark while camping because I read *Frankenstein* and *The Phantom of the Opera* during the day. Books also remind me of the wonderful days I’ve spent strolling sidewalks, reading in cafes, and browsing book stores, like the time I found a collection of Suzanne Vega’s writings in my favorite bookstore on Jackson Street in Athens, Georgia, and then walked up to Broad Street to read and have a cup of tea in my favorite coffee shop. I’ve spent many a day browsing used book stores, finding copies of my favorite books, like Françoise Sagan’s *Bonjour Tristesse*, Alex Garland’s *The Beach*, the novels of E. M. Forster, and several volumes of poetry by

Rainer Maria Rilke.

My shelves of books are my literary photo album. They have become the postcards of happy moments in my life.

Micheal Karczewski

Dear Reader,

I was sitting at my computer the other night trying to think of something to write for the contest when all of a sudden, the lights went out. The whole house was pitch black and I could feel myself instantly wrapped in total darkness. From the shock of it, a myriad of thoughts started running through my head like:

- I wonder how long this is going to last?
- Am I the only one without electric or did my neighbor's lights go out, too?
- Maybe if I sit here for a few minutes they will come back on like they have before.
- How do I see my way into the kitchen to get the candles without knocking over the bird cage?
- I wonder if the food in the fridge and freezer will spoil?.
- Should I try to call the electric company?
- Where's my cell phone?

Thank goodness my cell phone was right next to me and so was my purse. I fumbled for my penlight on my key chain and I twisted it to the ON position and, "then there was light". To my amazement, a little penlight dispelled my darkness. I was able to make it to the kitchen without bumping the birds and scaring them to death to light the candles. Voila, more light. I called the electric company and they said the whole township was experiencing a "blackout". It was going to be awhile before it was restored.

While I waited, I remembered, eight years ago there was another moment, more somber, that suddenly overshadowed our country on September 11, 2001. Much was lost that day that will never be replaced. But through it all, there was a penlight to dispel that darkness and with it we retained our freedom. It replaced fear with the courage to fight for the American way of life. That penlight was HOPE.

Hope will dispel any invisible darkness and shed the light of life for all to see. May we never lose sight of it. Alexander Pope wrote, "Hope springs eternal". When all else fails there is still hope.

Effie Truver

Dear Reader,

"We are all different. We live in different places from Macon, Georgia to Denver, Colorado; from Tucson, Arizona to New York City, New York. In Bloomington, Indiana we are different than folks in Busan, South Korea and those in Sevilla, Spain.

We look different--some of us are tall, some short; some are thin and others more stocky. Our eyes are different shapes and colors, our noses are different from the small button to the Pinocchio type (even those who tell the truth), and telling the truth doesn't change those sizes.

We have different beliefs and different political systems. We are Republican and Democrat, with a smattering of independents. We are Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist or some of us prefer no label or affiliation. Our cultures influence our differences. We can learn from one another.

We have different lifestyles, married, single, life long partners who choose fidelity and others who have "open relationships."

All these differences and yet we are all the same. If we really were attentive to how much we have in common, we could create a more peaceful world. Regardless of our country, our lifestyle, our political or religious affiliation, we "all" still want to be loved; we "all" want to be respected and treated with justice and mercy; we "all" want to have similar needs of shelter, nutrition and security.

We can celebrate our differences and recognize our sameness, and stop attempting to change others. Simply try to change ourselves into who we really want to be. Maybe we could simply set an example being so happy and so grateful for the wonderful lives we do have that. Seeing that, others might want to have that same serenity.

We don't have to kill others because they seem different. We need to focus on how we are the same. We all experience the same emotions. We all love our children and would prefer that they not war against each other.

Inner greed creates situations where each of us want what the other has--"the grass is always greener" somewhere else is really a lie. Wherever we go there we are. Each of us could realize that we have enough. Perhaps we can just let enough be enough."

Thank you and have a great vacation.

Peace,
Sarah Cochran

Dear Reader,

Author's note: I searched everywhere for a photo of one of these pomanders to include with the column. I found lots of pics of orange pomanders, but nothing like these...they must truly be a "lost" art!

When I was a kid my mom was into handicrafts. She still makes handcrafted items, but back then (in the sixties) the world of crafting was much different than it is now. Today we have mega craft stores that sell all kinds of supplies, kits, and books. Back then, crafting was a little more "organic"...one lady would create something new, and soon it would fly like wildfire through town via workplaces, clubs, and neighbors. In those days, everyone would be making the latest "craft du jour" with stuff gleaned from their house, yard or the five and dime.

I remember one year mom made closet pomanders. They were hugely popular for a bit, and we had one hanging from every closet rod and door way. Mom's orders backed up and pretty soon we kids were helping in the "pomander production line". Here's how we made them:

First, cover a big, fresh orange with cloves. This was the hard part because it really hurt the fingertips to push those whole cloves through the skin of the orange. (On the upside, our hands smelled yummy.) Once the orange is covered with cloves, attach a pretty ribbon loop with a corsage pin. This was the beginning of the fun part – the ribbon was the first colorful step in the decorative process.

Next, select a pretty swatch of nylon net. You could buy this by the yard at the local five and dime for just pennies, in every color of the rainbow. You could choose one color, or get creative and mix it up!

Cut the net into smallish rectangles and pinch the rectangle down the middle to create a little pouf. With an old-fashioned hair pin (the pointy kind that looks like a u-shaped wire), anchor the pouf to the orange. Repeat this process about a million times, placing the poufs very close to each other, until the orange is completely covered.

The final and coolest step was adding the accent of plastic–plastic!–flowers. A few clustered around the hanging ribbon, or a spray cascading down the side of the pomander–oh, the finished product was delightful!

We sold the heck out of those pomanders that year, but sadly I've never made one since. Hmmm, maybe I'll make one for everyone on my Christmas list this year!

Karin DeLaurentis

Dear Reader,

Here is my Poem:

Remembering 9/11

Listen people, near and far,
For in my heart there is a scar.
My heart was broken one Tuesday morning,
As four planes put the world in mourning.
All the people who were there,
When our country was attacked by air.
That's the day our lives were changed,
And all our dreams were rearranged.
We can no longer live in dreams,
But we must not forget the screams.
For everyone that died that day,
Had family and friends that cried and prayed.
We must honor those we lost that day,
So that the terrorist won't have their way.

We live and breathe, and also grieve,
Because of them and their belief.
Always remember the eleventh of September.

Margaret A. Estes

Dear Reader,

Sometimes it is interesting or maybe informative, to examine why we are the way we are. As I packed the contents of our coat closet during a recent move, I asked myself why I have so many coats. After all, you can only wear one at a time! Then I remembered a coat from 1958.

I grew up in East Texas where it gets as cold as “Blue Blazes,”--one of those Texas sayings you have to be from Texas to understand. Keeping six growing kids in winter coats cost money my parents didn't have. But that year I got a brand new coat.

It was three quarter length, with one giant button below a tulip-style collar, and hung straight from that button, with wide, long sleeves that turned up at the wrist to form deep cuffs. Better miracles through chemistry had produced some of the first washable nylon fibers, and this coat was made of off-white washable nylon, which belied its a-line, high-fashion shape. It wasn't actually very warm. Daddy won it in a sales contest at my uncle's TV shop where he worked.

I was the oldest, and the nearest to fitting into it, and I needed a coat, so I got the white coat. It was a woman's coat, and I was not a woman, but a slight 13 year old girl. On me, the coat was full-length, and looked ridiculous. I only wanted NOT to stand out among my friends—none of whom were wearing women's white fluffy coats to school. I remember how embarrassed I was to wear it, but I was unable to hurt Daddy's feelings by saying how ugly I thought it was.

I have this indelible mental snapshot of me walking to school, snuggling into that coat to keep warm, when a teacher passed me. As she went by, she said, “Nice coat.” Maybe she meant to be kind, but I can still feel the devastation of that comment. It told me that I looked just as ridiculous in that grown up coat as I'd thought. Now I can laugh about it, but, even after all these years, I still worry about having the right coat!

Brenda Hayden

Hi,

The tail lights of my son Seth's SUV gradually faded in the distance as he drove away in the early dawn hours. The morning dew glistened on the freshly cut blades of grass and the sweet summer air wafted gently as I stood in the middle of the street; lost in the moment. Memories flooded my mind like a dam about to break. I was taken back to his first day of kindergarten, and as I leaned down to kiss him on his cheek, he looked up at me with his sweet blue eyes, and said, "But I will miss you, Mommy". And now, having just graduated from college, he was about to embark on his new life in New York City, and I wanted to say, "But I will miss you, Seth."

I once read that if you make a friend with change you make a friend for life. Who wrote that? Were they secretly spying on my life? 2008 was a whirlwind year of change for me. The day after Seth left, my oldest son Chris embarked on his own adventure. He and his buddies loaded up their Chevy van and left for LA to hit it big in the music industry. Then my daughter Jayna left home for college. Talk about empty nest syndrome!

The events of the previous twelve months should have been a precursor to rest of the year. I got divorced, moved, changed jobs and lost my dear brother, Dave, to a tough battle with Lou Gehrig's disease. If I had known that all of this would be my fate, I would have bought stock in Kleenex, or at least purchased several cases at Sam's Club!

I miss Dave every day, but the memories we shared will always be with me. Chris made it to LA, but alas the music industry wasn't ready for him, so his journey took him to New York as well. Now my daughter and I get to visit The Big Apple to see the boys.

Like they say, "when life gives you lemons, make lemonade." Because I know the lemonade of life will sometimes be sweet; with new joys and blessings, and sometimes be tart; with trials and heartache, I am armed and ready with my Sam's Club card and a case of Kleenex!

Elaine Ryan

Dear Reader,

When my mother told me, treasure your college years, they will be the best of your life; I don't think this really sunk in until this semester as I helped freshmen take their first steps into college life.

As I watched freshmen and their parents moving in and becoming acquainted with their new home, I realized how important these years are and how they will affect the rest of my life in more than just my

career path. I listened to the President of the university address the new students and realized I have already begun my journey into adulthood. He emphasized how students must learn to rely on themselves as opposed to their parents. Now is the time when we must use everything our parents taught us to become the adults we were meant to be.

While walking around campus, student leaders wore shirts saying "Ask Me". We truly were asked every question about campus possible. This seemed mundane at the time, but at the end of the day, we truly felt we had helped make the transition possible. Even questions such as where is the nearest McDonalds helped students in the learning process. These questions made me think back and laugh about my own adventures as a freshmen. I have cherished all of those memories; whether good or bad, because they all taught me something about life.

The words of my mother, still follow me as I start my Junior year. I feel she truly has taught me to cherish all memories. I will use this advice even after college, as I venture down my career path into the great unknown world of cubicles, suits, and paying off student loans. I will try to see the good in all of my life's adventures, and in the words of Lee Ann Womack, "When you get the chance to sit it out or dance, I hope you dance".

Anna Rogers

Dear Reader,

I am a widow as of 2007, but one of my more memorable vacations was in Victoria, BC, when I took a four- day trip via the Victoria Clipper. Come along with me as I remember...

"Madam, you have excellent taste," remarked the clerk as he placed a \$10,000.00 diamond and ruby bracelet on my wrist. After all, what is a vacation for if one cannot afford to dream? I had just had afternoon tea at the Empress Hotel and wanted to keep up the illusion of grandeur.

Four days on the island were the result of an ad in the Sunday newspaper travel section. My hosts picked me up at the Empress Hotel after my visit to the Butchart Gardens which included a double-decker bus tour of the city.

I had made my reservation on the Internet. Michaela and Rick O'Dougherty, owners of the Lord Nelson, had assured me that the bus stop was just around the corner from their inn.

I took the ten-minute bus ride each morning to the the wharf where I could walk, shop, and gawk all day. The walking was necessary to rid myself of the calories of Michaela's gourmet breakfasts. Shopping and gawking is every vacationer's right.

Zero-cost vacation entertainment included a guided tour of the Parliament, chats with assistants in five bookstores, and talking with a retired navy veteran who was minding his granddaughter's aged daschund.

Low-cost fun included a ferry trip across the inner harbor and viewing the staged marriage ceremony of a young couple. The "minister" was dazzling in his brocaded coat and buckled slippers. The vows were sealed with a kiss, and the lovers were presented with a handwritten memento of the ceremony.

Moderately-priced fun was a tour of Anne Hathaway's cottage near my inn. Unfortunately, the replica is no longer in existence. Insurance costs were just too great. The thatched roofs of Shakespeare's time are too much of a fire hazard.

One final note, my trip was done on public transportation without car rental. I dislike driving and do as little as I can. I did take taxis twice, but I could have taken a bus, but age (67 at the time) and laziness won out. I do have to credit my husband* for taking me to AMTRAK and for picking me up at the train station when I returned.

*miss him

Susan C. Dawson

Dear Reader,

Yesterday our book club group met to discuss a title no one seemed to particularly enjoy. Our conversation wandered to why we love books, love to read, love to get together to mingle each month. One friend threw out a question, "What's your favorite word?" The responses included simple words: copper, green, vodka, grow, meritocracy, sex, cure, plan, freedom, flower, and requiem. After a few laughs, Tina shared a story with us about her word, freedom. "Not only is the word uncomplicated and beautiful to pronounce, it's something we all want. Freedom to wear what we want, eat what we want, freedom of speech." We all nodded. Tina continued, "When my mom was 14, she and her 12 year old sister and parents were forced to work in a German work camp in Poland. It was war time and Germany had invaded Poland. They worked from 6 am to sundown seven days a week shoveling snow, cooking, tending chickens, and cleaning. The children could only see their parents for 4 hours on Sundays. The family had lost everything to the ravages of war. They shared the few shoes, coats, and clothing they had. When the war ended, they fled to England and the family was separated. The parents (my grandparents) searched for the two sisters (my mom and aunt) for three years. Finally, in 1951 everyone was reunited at Ellis Island, New York. I was born 10 years later." The group sat silent and stunned. Tina broke the quiet, "It didn't matter that they didn't have any "stuff" because they had their freedom." We all cheered and toasted each other with our coffee mugs. We can't wait until next month's discussion. Coincidentally, we're reading "The Help" by Kathryn Stockett—it promises to be an uplifting read. Tina promised to bring photos of her amazing family.

Val Kocin

Dear Reader,

Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to say goodbye from the restaurant after all. I had thought the festive atmosphere of eating out would make parting easier, and we'd avoid the little dither-bits of last minute "Did I remember everything?" and "Here, take these with you!" that detract from a mindful goodbye. However, that mindful goodbye might be just too much for a two-and-a-half year old!

As we strolled out to our cars, I thought about what I wanted to say: This time, I was going to do it right. First, I approached my daughter-in-law, who always looks like she's going to do the hundred-yard dash when I make a move to hug her. To her credit, though, she lets me follow through. After last-minute reminders for sewing and photo favours, I turned to my son, who doesn't run from hugs, but still often turns a little pink at the sentimentality. With our hugs, we exchanged humorous quips about the return trip—flights caught, connections made, equilibriums maintained.

Then came wee Pyper, who was already beginning to show some bewilderment and apprehension at what she was witnessing. In the past, goodbye had always meant little to her—Mamma was there, Papa was there, everything was familiar around her—what was the big deal? But not this time: the worried face, the beginnings of tears in the sad eyes, the arms outstretched, then tightly clasped around my neck... "I go Gramma's house? I go see Gramma's bunnies?" she repeated, her voice rising higher each time in panic and desperation. She pushed her mother and father away with an extended "Noooooo" each time they tried to take her from me.

I had worried from the day she was born that the 900 miles between us would prevent our bonding. I had spent a month at a time, three times a year, helping out my son and daughter-in-law, hoping it would be enough to let this little miracle know her grandma in the profound way that equates grandmother with love and security without conditions. Now, I was faced with a consequence of achieving that desire, and instead of giving us pleasure, it was causing us pain. Here was a hurt I couldn't make better with a kiss—a bittersweet bonding moment for both of us.

Susan Gaye Bell

Dear Reader,

....Rambling thoughts on old age...Sometimes I think old age is like being permanently pregnant...I'm 77 years old and I feel as mentally alert as I did when I was 17...Let me explain why I feel this way by listing the ten reasons that led me to this conclusion...Number 1 -The Spirit—I'm willing to tackle anything but my body won't cooperate, a result of my concentration span being short like when I was pregnant, not much different now....Number 2- Sleepless Nights...As I toss and turn trying to get comfortable with my aching bones its like being nine months pregnant...Number 3-Leisure Time....My favorite pastime is reading...now I have the time to read but my eyes are always tired...like when I was up all night worrying is this the night I will go rushing out into the night to the hospital... Number 4- Finances...When expecting your first baby your finances are low....and when you retire your right back where you started from... Number 5 -Diet...when you are pregnant you have to eat healthy food whether you want to or not...for the sake of the baby....at 77 I have to eat healthy for my own sake because I have to worry about high blood pressure and diabetes...Number 6- Exercise— I finally have time to take long walks, swim or do gardening...but I'm lucky if I can last maybe a half hour at anything...again just like all those things I wasn't able to do when I was pregnant.... 7- Mood

swings....Everybody calls us crotchety old folks, when you are pregnant they call it hormones...
Number 8-Weight Gain- I can barely tie my shoes as I struggle to reach my feet in the morning...sound familiar?...not only the tummy stopping me but aching pains in the joints...Number 9–Clothes...the first thing that’s goes when you are pregnant... today I could easily wear maternity clothes because they are great for hiding a tummy...it’s a wonder some designer hasn’t come up with the tummy idea for older women...instead of making us wear bigger sizes because we have added a little weight around the middle... Number 10-Happy Times-Since being pregnant was a happy time for me so is old age....and there you have it....

Marian Finn

Dear Reader,

In mid-June 1945, a Sunday afternoon, I was sitting on the porch thinking of my mother, and impacted by what she had just told me. Until lunch today, not wanting to disturb my week of finals, she had not written or called me with the news. She was now upstairs resting. This, I had seldom seen her do in mid-day.

The war in Europe had been over since early May and some of our soldiers were beginning to come home. However, all mail and packages mailed to my brother Billy, still in Europe with Patton’s Army, had been sent back stamped ominously, Address Unknown. Since that time, she also had not heard from him. Her appearance and manner had changed dramatically since I last saw her at Christmas. Face pale and translucent, was almost ethereal: speech quiet and strained. Her suffering was palpable. Calls to authorities had given her the same answer. “What are we to think, Janey, she asked?” I had no answer and could think of no contingencies.

Not many cars were on the street that day as gasoline was still rationed. People walked everywhere, except for emergencies, and some were coming home from church in family groups of twos and three: a few were alone. Lost in my self-absorbed thoughts, I failed to notice a group from which one had turned in our direction. I could see now he was a soldier carrying his duffle bag over his shoulder. My first thoughts were, ‘I hope I know him’ but then came the numbing realization that his stride was the unmistakable stride of my brother. Momentarily, I could not move but then rushed inside to call to Mother, telling her Billy was walking down the street. He came up the stairs onto the porch, threw off his duffle bag, gave me a perfunctory hug, shook hands with our father and walked inside asking, “where is Mother?” I told him she was upstairs resting. They met on the landing. There was no exuberance. Gently, she touched his cheeks, his eyes, his mouth, his chin while murmuring, over and over, only to herself “Billy, my Billy”. In a quiet voice, he looked at her and said simply, “Mother”; then took her in his arms, buried his face in her shoulder and cried. I turned away from the poignancy.

Jane W. Yoder

Dear Reader,

Here I go agonizing again. I’ve had so many ideas and starts to doing this contest and still have no clue as to what to actually submit. Talk about feeling inadequate. You’d think 385 words would be an easy

task for someone who aspires to be a writer but, even with putting something on paper or tapping on keys, I was still at a loss about what to write. It seems words won't flow for me when it's important or, when the words do flow, I'm not at a place to get them written down or share them with anyone else. It's like I believe what I have to say doesn't matter to anyone but me.

There have been a few opportunities for me to express myself and I usually do a pretty fair job. It's the many other opportunities that have me feeling unsure of my abilities. I don't know why I cannot figure out my writings mean something to someone even if I never get them published for everyone. I guess because I want to help a lot of people in the only way I think I know how. It hasn't registered that the praises of the few matter as much, if not more, than the silence or criticisms from the masses. No matter how much or many people enjoy what I have to write (since writing is the only voice I seem to have) if I have just one say they don't like it or don't say anything at all, I get down and want to stop writing altogether. I haven't stopped writing yet though but I still take the blows pretty hard.

I've no idea why I keep doing that.

I'm not looking for sympathy I guess. I figure I'm just trying to vent until I can figure out how to make the genius button inside me click and I write something spectacular. All I, or anyone else for that matter, can do is just keep doing the thing I love until I can achieve something that will make me happy. Forget the naysayers (who are sometimes the loudest in my own mind) and keep striving until I get somewhere. I challenge all who feel the same as I do to strive as well. Are you with me?

Blessings to you!

Lucinda B Witherspoon Joyner

Dear Reader,

One would think that common sense would, well, be common in everyone. Look at the people around you, many that you run into are often on errands or wrapped up in their own thoughts. Some may acknowledge you and others may ignore you, but whatever their reaction, you can be confident that they are good individuals and common sense, like the sun, is a daily occurrence. This reflects the overall population of our country. There may be some anomalies here and there, but overall we are savvy and bursting with common sense. Now let's look at our elected officials.

In Washington, common sense is like Big Foot, rarely seen, and when spotted, it is from a great distance. Any photographic evidence of common sense is grainy and the experts will say it is improbable that it exists. The elusiveness of Big Foot a/k/a common sense can be applied to our elected officials. They claim that they are doing what is best for us and the country, but based on their lack of common sense, it appears that they only have their interests in mind. As is our right, we question our representatives about such serious issues as the economy, health care, and the future of our nation. However, many times they ignore us and pat us on the head like children. They tell us, "We know what's best. We're doing the job of making the hard decisions that you can't or have no ability to do."

Our representatives patronize us, humor us, and tell us what they think we want to hear. It appears that they have either lost their common sense, or flushed it down the toilet.

Our country was founded on the premise of “We the People,” and the Founders celebrated the traits of virtue, humility, intelligence, honesty, responsibility, and most importantly common sense. These traits are alive and well in “We the People,” but not in our representatives. Our officials must be mindful of “We the People,” and value the traits that make our country unique. To quote Thomas Jefferson, “I can never fear that things will go far wrong where common sense has fair play.” It is time that Big Foot becomes a common, verifiable sighting in Washington.

Sincerely,

Melissa Dallago

Dear Reader,

My favorite place in the world as a child was a condemned building. Of course, it wasn't technically condemned at the time, but as I realize from describing it to people now, it was pretty bad even then. The house was on a lake in Michigan, and had been in my family for a hundred years. The second story of the house had been sealed off for ages, and was filled with bats. We used the stairs to store the board games and comic books that entertained us all summer. The toilet could only be flushed by pouring a bucket of lake water in it, you couldn't use the shower, and one corner of the ceiling in the kitchen was propped up with boards. By the time I was a teenager, we slept outside the house in tents because the house was in such disrepair, but it didn't matter. We still spent the summer swimming, fishing, taking walks along the lake, and in the evenings playing board games and cards. That was often the only time during the year I saw all my aunts, uncles and cousins.

A few more years went by, and the house was officially condemned and torn down. I wasn't able to be there—by then I was away at school and couldn't make the trip up every summer anyway—but my family videotaped the destruction, and I cried watching the demolition. My family talked about selling the property altogether, since all us kids were growing up and it was getting harder to get everyone together at the lake. We couldn't let it go, though—we all promised to make the trip more often, to really appreciate the lake the way we did as kids.

Thankfully, my great-uncle had a new house built. This was the first summer back, and I was glad to realize the house feels the same. We swam, fished, walked around the lake, and, most importantly, I got to spend time with my aunts, uncles and cousins who I so rarely get to see. So although they say you can't go back, that's exactly what I did this summer, and what I plan on doing every summer—going back to the days when life was simple and joy was being with the people you love.

Thank you so much for having this Dear Reader contest--what a blast it is to come up with a column. (Although I don't know how you do it everyday!)

Thank you,
Jacy Owens

Dear Suzanne--

“It’s been 15 years. What on earth will we talk about?”

It was too late to back out. I was already in the car on my way to pick her up. My friend was in town visiting family, and I hadn’t seen her in 15 years. We had recently reconnected through Facebook, and when she knew she’d be in town, she suggested we get together and catch up. I was convinced, though, that our whole lunch would be filled with awkward silences. After all this time, what was there to talk about? I was as nervous as if it had been a first date.

I can’t believe I was so worried. The minute we saw each other we started talking, and didn’t stop for three hours. Somehow in that time, we covered our jobs, our families (and our inevitable issues with them), the recent deaths of her mother and my uncle, religion, politics, and birth control: all the usual light-hearted topics. The conversation never waned, never felt forced.

What surprised me the most was the fact that we didn’t talk about the old times, all the old friends that we had in common. I had assumed that we would spend most of our time talking about the old days just because we knew it was one thing we could both relate to. It turned out that there were so many other things to chat about that we just never got around to it. An hour after we finished eating, the waitress had to politely ask us to pay our bill so she could go home, although she made sure to tell us that we were welcome to stay and keep talking. And we did.

I do this to myself so often. I make plans with someone and as the time grows nearer, I get nervous because I have no idea what we’ll talk about. I start to think that I’d rather just stay home. But of course in the end, I’m always happy that I went. Now I know that even if it’s been 15 years since I’ve seen someone, I just need to remember that I was friends with them for a reason, and it’s not likely that either of us will have changed so much that that reason doesn’t exist anymore.

Megan McKeever

Dear Reader,

Back in the late 70's my pastor husband and I were in a faith walk where we didn't receive a salary. Our provision came from the hands the Lord chose to use for that purpose in our lives. One such person was Millie, a lady in her 70s. She called me one day and said there was an eight week quilting class coming up and she wanted to go but didn't want to go alone. She would pay my way if I would go with her. Learning to quilt was not high on my priority list at the time, but I agreed to go so she wouldn't have to go alone.

To make a long story short, she didn't become a quilter. The class had satisfied that desire in her. However, I came down with the Quilt Pox!! I fell in love with the colors and patterns, and each new project was an excitement like no other. This was to pave the way for the next twenty-four years of my life until Fibromyalgia made it necessary for me to stop. I became a quilt teacher, lecturer, and quilt shop owner. I touched many lives through the years, and it all started with Millie. Many gals with heavy hearts came and shared their burdens around the quilt shop table in a way they would have been unable to do in another setting. The satisfaction of planning and making a quilt became a reality and not just a dream in many.

One never knows the impact an act of generosity or kindness may have on another, and how far that may reach beyond that one.

Millie is gone now, but I will never forget the part she played in my life story, and the lives that were touched because of her.

Beverly A. Dickerson

Dear Reader

I was a new member of the club and this, the first project I was asked to chair. I had planned the gathering meticulously and thought (hoped) every facet had been covered. Little did I know!

The get-together was at my home. It was to be a meeting of minds so to speak, and I worried over it for a long time making sure everything would be perfect. Seating was arranged to allow for good conversation and exchange of ideas. Coffee and tea, along with assorted goodies rested on the sideboard ready to tantalize and tease.

I held my breath that morning as the doorbell rang continuously and guests arrived ready to start to work. I was excited putting my best foot forward as hostess, greeting, mingling and offering the refreshments.

Finally the ladies were seated comfortably balancing cups and plates on their laps, and the conversation was at a mid level hum throughout the room. That was a good sign. The chairman called the meeting to order and laid out the agenda for the morning.

Then an uninvited guest arrived. Regally she walked into the room and all attention was drawn to her. With her dazzling turquoise-blue eyes she seemed to take in everyone as she stood in the doorway. She strolled over to greet me; as usual I was astounded by her beauty. She certainly commanded the attention of all in the room.

Her silvery hair belied her age as did her form, but it was those eyes that mesmerize; sparkling with intelligence. Several others in the room greeted her as she made the rounds of all the guests before settling on the one chair still unoccupied. It seemed that particular piece of furniture was reserved for her as the royal blue shade complimented her lovely grey mane and only made those stunning eyes more compelling. At that point she curled in a furry ball, closed those eyes and took a nap!

Whoever bestowed the name Krystal on this lovely lady made the right call as her unique coloring

reminds me of a beautiful piece of crystal, glowing in reflected light. How could I not have chosen this beautiful Siamese cat to come live in my home? In retrospect, I guess it wasn't the worst thing that could have happened, was it?

Mary Lee Muntz

Dear Reader

We've lived in this neighborhood for twenty three years now. I can always remember exactly how long because I was pregnant with our third child when we moved in.

Over the years, the neighborhood has changed. The houses have needed new roofs, shutters, and I imagine a lot of updating inside. "For Sale" signs have sprung up and people have moved out while new families have moved in.

Nearly twenty years ago, a woman who lived down the street was killed when she went to get her mail. Her car, parked in the driveway, somehow lurched out of gear, hit her, and killed her. I heard she was working on an Advent calendar for her grandchild as it was spread out on her kitchen table. She was one of our local librarians. I remember her, but I didn't know she was my neighbor until after her death.

Another neighbor at the other end of the street lost a daughter in a car accident a few years later. I can't imagine the pain. She had another daughter and I sometimes see her in front of her home, holding hands with her granddaughter.

And now I am a grandmother. I will be the woman working on the Advent calendar this year. I will be the woman in the front yard next year chasing after her toddling grandchild.

And I will be the woman who will drive past these homes and think of these families, although we have never formally met. I will think of their loved ones and count my own blessings over and over again. They don't know that I remember, but I do.

And I can't help but wonder if these same people will drive past my home and think of the ball games we used to play in our front yard or the little boys racing up and down our driveway. Do they recall the years when our driveway looked like a used car lot? Do they remember the balloons on the mailbox for the graduation parties, and the weddings?

I find it interesting that we live so close to others and hear about events surrounding the lives in the neighboring homes, but we continue to keep to ourselves and life goes on.

Yes, life goes on.

Kathy Bowers

Suzanne,

I love to hear your stories about your cats, especially Rudy. I am also a cat lover. When my children were young I adopted a kitten from the local shelter who we named Zeke. One day near Halloween I asked the boys not to let Zeke out because people are very mean to cats (that's why shelters don't have cat adoptions near Halloween).

But Zeke ran out. He did not come home that day or the next. After 3 days of knocking on doors, calling the shelters and posting signs with a reward, we couldn't find him. We feared for the worse. I kept the basement window opened just in case he wanted to come home.

After 5 days I again went down to the basement and there was Zeke sitting inside the laundry sink. I was so happy I hugged and kissed him and immediately went to give him food and water. When I placed him on the floor, he fell over to the side. Zeke couldn't walk! The vet told me he had a broken pelvis. I thought about those contraptions that people make for their dogs when they are hit by a car and can't use their back legs. I told the vet that I was going to look into getting one made for Zeke, but he told me that a broken pelvis can heal and that all he needed was rest.

I went out and found a huge box, placed a blanket, and took a shoe box and turned it into a litter box. I also placed his food and water near his mouth so that he could reach it without standing up. Every morning and every night I would hold him up over the litter box. Zeke seemed to take it all in very calmly. Three weeks passed and then one morning I went down to check on him and I didn't see him in the box. He had gotten out by himself! Zeke was walking and I was so thrilled as I watched him walk unsteadily on all four paws. He eventually made a complete recovery.

Well that was 15 years ago and today Zeke is still with us and he is still our beloved kitten and a very important part of our family.

Sonia Miller

Dear Reader,

I woke up this morning in a foul mood. Our family went out last night and my 3 year old son with special needs decided that would be the moment to end his bout with constipation. Then he did not sleep last night and his reflux resurfaced. I did my weekly weight check and I had gained. When I put on my watch this morning the battery had stopped. I had a real woe is me attitude going.

So when the phone rang at 7:50 am and I saw my mom's cell number, I braced myself for bad news. Our family dog, Penny passed away. Mom found her this morning in her favorite spot. Penny, officially My Lucky Penny, had been a member of our household for 15 years. And in recent months, her health had been declining. She was losing her vision; her hearing was poor; she was no longer able to control her bodily functions; a previous back injury was becoming a problem again. Despite all of that, she was still always happy to see you and really quite spry if you were watching her.

In recent years, I'm sorry to say I didn't give her the attention she deserved. But it didn't make her love me any less. The last time I saw her she still wagged her tail, actually in her case she wagged her whole body. And I know she was happy to see me.

So while I was feeling blue I suddenly remembered a quote that a friend gave me once, “Happiness is a conscious choice not an automatic response.” I’ve decided I’m not going to be in a foul mood, I’m going to be happy. My son’s dirty diaper has long since been cleaned. We will come up with a solution for his sleep problems and we both were able to catch a nap this morning. The bout with reflux will pass. My weight gain was small and watch batteries can be fixed. Penny will still be gone, but 15 years is a great, long life for a Cocker Spaniel and we’ll always have our memories. Besides if she could be happy until the end, I can be happy even when I just want to crawl back in bed.

Melissa Meyer

Dear Reader,

Today I am on a hunt. I am on a hunt to find Golden Grahams Chocolate Marshmallow Treats. Wouldn’t you just know it, as soon as I fall in love with something, it disappears. Gone, never to be seen from again. Doesn’t matter what it is, jeans, bubble gum, socks, a restaurant, a candle scent, the list is never ending. They just up and vanish into thin air. It’s like having a black hole follow me around that just swallows up all my favorite things.

I’ve actually started getting into the habit of buying multiples of things. Whenever I go shopping I pick up two or three of everything, just in case. That’s my answer to everything now. I hear myself saying “Hey, you never know when it will be gone so let’s get a few extra just in case”. Our cupboards are filled with “just in case” stuff.

One year I went as far as buying 200 packs of gum that had been discontinued. Because only one store had it and only one store had 200 packs. Jeez, what do you have to do to get some gum around here? If only I was looking for some orange Popsicles.

So when I went to the store the other day to pick up my favorite treat, of course they were gone. So I sighed and thought why? Why this one too? I’m not taking this one lying down, I am contacting the company who makes it. So I did, and you know what? It’s not discontinued. I wanted to jump for joy. Scream it from the rooftops. Ok maybe I just wanted to run to the store and pick up a box or two. I am just so excited that I actually get to keep something this time. So I quickly go to the company’s website to use the product locator only to find out that no one in my area carries this product.

So I’m on a hunt.

Stacey Blashka

Dear Reader,

Poetry is a way of life. To understand it you have to feel it!

My Disgrace Is Not My Religion

I knew it wasn’t my fault what happened

I wasn't there but I faced the shame that was brought upon me
I watch as the buildings fall, taking down millions citizens with it
I stay and I watched like everybody else
But I didn't understand, I was young
Not knowing a tragedy had occurred that would change my life
I heard news and rumors of some many kinds
Which ones were true I did not know
But I went to school as I usually did
Uncaring what lied ahead of me
I saw people look at me
Many did that because of my veil but none ever criticized me for it before
I got a lot of those looks
Why I got them didn't become clear to me until later
"Go back where you came from", they said to me
Is that how they felt that it was my fault
Their looks alone pained me but their words caused me more unknown pain
I wanted to cry but I didn't
Why should I?
I didn't do anything wrong, I thought
I am merely a child, who would blame me for what had passed their country
But they did
They didn't stop tormenting me
My disease, unknown even to me, didn't cause me that much pain
My mother advised me not to wear my veil
Why I shouldn't wear it?
I did wear it and I kept my head high like any anyone would have
My parents grieved over my sickness and what has come passed me
But no I kept my head high
While theirs was low
"Why did you do it?" Someone ignorant asked me
Why I did it?
I didn't do it but you blame as if I ever the culprit
There was so much pain from the words but not from me
I went to hospital and laid there, unmoving for hours and stared at the ceiling
As if my answers lied in the panel walls
My mother came and talked to me, soothing words
I cried then, every tear that I had in me from the day of the incident
Crying for every citizen that died
Every Police Officer
Every Firefighter
Every Mother that lost a Child
Every Wife that lost her Husband
Every Husband that lost his Wife
Every Grandmother who lost her Grandchildren
Every child that had a disease the way I did and was dying and knew it
For my parents
For my classmates
Those who tormented me to the end of my days
Those who died disgracing others

Those who disgraced me for my religion
I cried, for everyone
But not me
Even when I died I knew from I had been through
That My Disgrace Is Not My Religion

Rabia Subhan

A thank you note to teacher friends after our last Civil War Encampment.

Near Hanover, along Mason/Dixon Line
Year of our Lord, 2009 ? sometime in May

Dear Friends,

I take this opportunity to write a word of thanks to my dearest friends to answer your kind note and most generous gift. It is with deep sadness and high regret that I fold my tent and stash my canteen.

But, at HMS, pickets don't fire at each other anymore.

All seem very tired of this war. They are saying that their term of enlistment is over, the best has been given by all. The commanders from both sides are in want of rest. Their children are grown and moving on to that higher grade of six. Will surely be a year of bookish learning wanted by those teachers, and thoughts of fightin' give way to enlightenment, we all hope.

My brave, loyal brothers and sisters on the Virginia side say adieu to that aggressive Army of the Potomac. What want have we of their talk and bother and blustering ways now that spring turns to summer? We each turn to home with the ending of this war, but not before I tend to the memories of dear-hearted kin. I think of the friendships we have each captured and carried in these long years of war.

My aproned friend Jim and his fiesty wife Sue, the spirited Reagon and the fair Ellen (with her hat, countin' the scavenger finds under the tree), the disappearance of the fire-haired Kathleen, the young boy, Klansek is remembered, and the one with the smile, Jamie? What will we remember of wet children in the night, rain, frost, campfire and canon smoke, biscuits and the kind man, Shiry with his water mist? There was Jules with her mink collar, and Jill and Wes when he slept by the fire. These surely are friends for life.

For me, a decade of encampments have passed. It was good ground, friends. Union and Rebels each to his side, each to his loyalty, each to the love of teachin'.

I am and will always be proud to have faught and served alongside each of you.

High honor to my beloved Robert E. Lee and the great state of Virginia!

Shelia Jordan

Dear Reader,

One of my earliest memories is of learning to read. I was sitting with my mom reading a children's book while she paused at the "of"s and "the"s to let me read them. Even then I knew that this knowledge I was on the brink of learning was life changing. As I grew up, my favorite pastime was reading. I would spend hours alone in my room with a book to escape the constant fighting of my brothers.

Unfortunately, in college and graduate school, I spent so much time reading for classes that I couldn't bring myself to read for pleasure-even in the summer. Reading had become a burden- a "have-to" instead of a "want-to". But when I went to work, I discovered the joy again especially during lunch breaks when reading allowed me to escape the reality I was dealing with all day as a social worker. When I had children, I almost lost reading again but this time I knew I had to hold on and read whenever I could. Now that they are no longer babies, it is easier to find that time. Also, I have been able to share my love of reading with my children. Seeing them get lost in books warms the cockles of my heart, as my mother says.

In recent years, I have discovered the joys of book clubs- a local one and these online ones-which expose me to books I never would have considered before. My reading horizons are much broader than ever before. The book club through my church has made reading a much less solitary activity. It always amazes me how many different reactions there can be to the same book. The discussion always adds a dimension to the book that I would not otherwise have experienced. I suppose after all these years of reading, I am now discovering that it's so good to read with friends.

Robin Obie

Dear Reader,

Amber was ready to run off with him, and Madge was worried. She perched on the arm of the sofa chewing on the side of her thumbnail, her eyes lost in thought.

Ranch life was hard and Amber was the one beautiful thing in Madge's life. She was not going to lose her like she lost her sister Zoie. Madge, an ex-city girl, had pampered and spoiled them for another life. Plans were all ready for Zoie to leave the ranch when she ran off one night with that...that...wild one! Do all females go for the bad boys? Madge thought back to her own high school days. What was so alluring about their wildness?

They hadn't seen Zoie for two agonizing months. She finally came home thin, unkempt, and expecting. She died giving birth. Madge was devastated and swore that would never happen to Amber.

Tom came in the room, "What's up, babe?" He frowned at her worried face.

"I saw him again today," she answered.

Where? Here at the ranch?

“No, at the crossing. He saw me, too...just stood staring at me, bold as brass.”

Where’s Amber?”

“I locked her upstairs,” Madge gave a bitter chuckle.

“Locked her up?” Tom laughed, too. “A bit paranoid, aren’t we?”

But he sobered up when he saw the look on Madge’s face...Zoie.

The night’s darkness came down fast at the ranch under the rim rock, and Madge sat at the open window with the lights off. She could hear Amber upstairs, restless. As Madge watched the front yard drenched in moonlight, the words to the poem about Bess, the landlord’s daughter ran through her mind.... *A highwayman comes riding, up to the old inn-door.*

Come on Highwayman, I’m ready.

The rifle rested on the windowsill.

What happens at the ranch stays. She dismissed any legality with a sneer...too late.

He suddenly appeared, a dark silhouette under Amber’s window.

Madge coolly pulled the trigger. The shot rang out and he dropped on the spot.

*“...they shot him down on the highway,
Down like a dog on the highway,”*

Upstairs she found Amber trembling, terror in her eyes from the sound of the shot.

“That’s ok, honey,” soothed Madge as she stroked the prize winning collie’s head.

“He wasn’t for you...danged coyote”

Patricia Hentges

Dear Reader,

We just returned from taking the grandson Erik on a cruise on Lake Huron. The only times I had ever seen Lake Huron were from the Blue Water Bridge crossing over to Canada. Being on the lake in a cruise ship is so exciting. This was Erik's first time on a boat in his 9 years. We were in awe of the large expanse of water and a child delight with it. When the cruise was over and we disembarked we were all sad to leave this new adventure but knew it was the start of many more to be had with Erik. Especially when grandpa asked " Did you like the trip Erik and he said it was awesome." Memories were made.

Thank you,

Linda Verdier

Dear Reader,

My five year old son started kindergarten this year. He's having a rough time being at school the whole day without mommy. I don't know if it's my fault because of the social anxiety genes I gave him, or if it's my fault because I have been a stay-at-home mom and didn't socialize him around other children properly, but I am pretty sure it's my fault one way or the other. It's like he knows this, too, because even though I have to leave him in the mornings in the arms of the school counselor; with him crying, reaching, begging me to stay, she calls later to report that once I leave he calms down and settles in fine. When I pick him up he says he had a fun day and that he won't cry the next morning. But then he starts thinking about it that evening and asks the same questions over and over. "Why do I have to go to school?" "Why can't you stay with me all day?" "Why does it take so long for school to be over", and "After Friday, do I not ever have to go back?" I told him that if he just keeps going, even though he's sad and misses me at first, that eventually he will get used to it and will have fun and not be sad at school anymore. "Just trust me on this", I told him. He wanted to know what trust meant, so I said it meant to believe me. "But I don't believe you" was his answer. Later I told my dad about this and he corrected me, "No, trust is when you believe me because you love me". We've had twelve days now going on trust and it's starting to get a little easier. As long as I kiss both of his hands (front and back), give him a picture of me, put his watch on, and give him a spritz of daddy's cologne, we have a mostly tear-free drop off, and I'm starting to think that maybe, somehow, I did something right after all.

Kimarie Lamberson

Dear Reader,

My 85 year-old mother moved in with me two and a half years ago. She was in a wheelchair and unable to live in her own house any more, but was much too "with it" for a nursing home. I prepared a bedroom on the first floor for her in the house where I lived alone, and she had the run of the downstairs. She brought all her crafts materials with her and promptly set up shop in my dining room. We installed a TV in her bedroom and she played Fox News and QVC shopping network day and night. I would often creep downstairs at night to turn the volume down because she woke up if I turned it off. She said it was her "nightlight" but I knew she played it all the time because she was lonely at her own house and got in the habit.

She was particular about her meals and grocery products, yet she was grateful for all the meals I made. She criticized my hairdo, yet she thanked me for doling out her pills in the pillbox. Suddenly, I took more interest in recipes and cooking. I started to eat more healthfully and enjoyed the company at dinner. I even wore my hair up a few times. I encouraged her crafts even though it meant that I couldn't have guests over for dinner.

All in all, I think our situation is a testament to cross-generational living.

Donna Dolan

Dear Reader,

You never outgrow your need for...Mom! I found that out the hard way the day our daughter left to start her freshman year at Taylor. It was also the first day of my new full-time teaching assignment after a 20-some year hiatus.

What a dilemma! Do I fulfill my mom duties and see our daughter safely enfolded in Taylor's academic arms or do I begin my contractual teaching duties? I chose the latter. As a grandmother and mother of five, jumping (again) into a teaching career after earning my master's degree was traumatic enough. Rationalizing the situation, I felt sure that with two other siblings at the same university, Meg would adjust quickly, even though my heart was torn.

I left very early that morning, after looking in on a soundly sleeping daughter, knowing that somehow our home would not be the same. Yes, we had faced the same partings three times earlier when our three oldest went to start their lives away from us as college students, and I knew from experience that thrusting each one out of our protective family nest always left us prayerfully bereft for awhile.

Fast forward to nearly twenty years later. We are seated in the airport in Jacksonville, Florida waiting for our flight. We had been discussing the complexities of forgiveness when I asked Meg if she remembered her first day at Taylor and added that we didn't hear from her for weeks afterward. I voiced my sorrow at not feeling I could be with her that day.

Suddenly, without warning, the dam broke and all the pent-up emotions she had felt that day streamed down her face. "Mom, you didn't even wake me to say goodbye!" she sobbed.

Dumbfounded, I wrapped her in my arms and shared her struggle. "Meg, I'm so sorry. I was just so apprehensive about my first day. Do you forgive me?"

"Of course I forgive you, but it hurt then and it hurts now."

Swallowing a huge lump in my throat and wishing that things we do in life could somehow be undone, I sat with our fourth child in that noisy airport and counted my blessings. Forgiveness once again had been extended and joy was in realizing how important Mom's role really is.

Myrna Rarick

Dear Reader,

One of my neighbors is lost--John's partner of 26 years moved out, and he's left teetering without an anchor. He forgot how to stand without leaning. I asked him to join me in my early morning walk. Like a toddler on unsteady legs, he stumbles alongside me struggling for a pace and lifestyle unfamiliar to

him. I walk straight and energetically, but then I've been doing this for years: walking and living alone. In fact, I think he joined me not for the exercise but to seek advice for a quick and easy way to survive unexpected isolation. What should I tell him? That there is a huge difference between "alone" and "lonely" and some people have to experience the void of loneliness in order to appreciate the distinction? Lonely is only a state of mind; we can be lonely within a crowd, while being alone can be a rewarding journey into solitary refinement.

True, some jaunts are more enjoyable with others, such as sharing reactions to a movie or a culinary treat. But going it alone is not punishment; in fact, I'll advise John to enjoy the opportunity while he can. I'll tell him about my mother who chooses the challenges of living alone because the trade off, her independence, is more important. We point out that living in a retirement center would provide opportunities to mingle with her peers and fill her calendar with social activities not accessible to her now. But she relishes having a choice, while it is still hers, to walk a path of freedom she didn't feel the need to explore when her husband was alive.

For, John, no matter how many examples I provide, he has to hear the companionable silence of aloneness, when it's quiet enough to listen without distractions to inner voices that lead to personal enlightenment. Right now, he's wavering on an edge, wondering if he can handle being on his own, while also considering a search for a new soul-mate. He wants me to steer him in a direction, but he has to pilot his own choice of journey.

I like when my walks merge with others, so John is welcome to walk beside me, his cautious baby steps down an uncertain trail, while I trek the familiar, comfortable, even nurturing trail of aloneness.

Linda Panczner

Dear Reader:

I felt hurt, and, I have to admit, yes, jealous too. You see I was already an experienced Na Na with two grand girls and three grand boys. I remember fondly when each of my daughters' depended on me for so much with their newborns. I was there to rock, cuddle and bathe them, to bundle them up and bring them home with me to give sleep deprived parents a break. I was the one who was called in the middle of the night with a desperate question. It was I who bonded with those little ones from the day they came home from the hospital.

Now it was my son's turn, and it had been a long time since we had a baby in the family. I was so excited to hear that my son and his wife were adopting a baby boy. Yet this time was different. Another grandmother took center stage~her mother. Although I shared in the joy, I found myself on the sidelines of their lives rather than as an active participant. Now I was relegated to calling before I came over. I was given times which would be convenient, and it was rare when I would arrive and the other grandmother wouldn't be there holding My grand boy.

It was only when I talked to a friend who was the mother of just sons that I found out it is different with sons than it is with daughters. One afternoon while returning from such a visit, feeling frustrated and deprived of my rightful place, it occurred to me for the first time that this was Her first grandchild. I had been so focused on what I was missing out on that I failed to see that maybe it was "her turn" rather

than mine. I had my turn with five precious grandchildren.

Having been raised as an only child, I still have remnants of "it's all about me". I embraced a life lesson that day. I call it "taking my turn, but only my turn". I have found many opportunities to use this new awareness.

However, I could not help myself from suggesting to my youngest unmarried son that he might consider marrying an orphan. You see, I'd like my turn again.

Sincerely submitted,

Marsha Conboy

Dear Reader,

We're moving, see, my husband and I. We're moving with our three dogs, two cats, and one hamster. We aren't moving very far, in fact it's only about twenty minutes away. We're moving into our first home, a blessing and a lot of hard work wrapped into one perfect home. However, this story isn't about our first home, it's about one of the first memories we made in it.

Last Friday we "borrowed" two of my siblings, my younger brother and sister, to finish helping us move. We went after work and spent hours carting car loads from the old house to the new house. My sister and I sang at the top of our lungs to crazy songs on the radio and talked a lot about middle school (she's in eighth grade). Meanwhile, my husband was riding with my brother and they spent the time singing along to whatever music boys like to listen to. We didn't finish until midnight, and stole out to the 24-hour super store down the road for some late night supper.

After getting dinner fixings and heading back to the house we all swarmed in our new small kitchen and ate while we talked. We joked and laughed until we could barely swallow our food and our noses were threatening to spew soda. Then we played games until 2 am, when we all fell asleep.

The next morning, after breakfast, we headed out to the beach on the lake. The waves were HUGE because of the coming storms, and we had more fun than I'd had in a very long time swimming and getting shoved by the waves. We played games and giggled furiously. My husband went and got pizza and pop, and we sat on the beach watching the water while we ate our lunch, all spread out with three hopeful dog faces watching us. Then we hit the playground, running around with each other and racing on the monkey bars, spinning on the merry-go-round, and flying on the swings. I don't remember ever laughing so hard! Splashing in the waves and scampering around on a playground aren't something I do every day or even think about doing. However, this treat of spending time with my family was something I desperately needed, even though I didn't know it.

Angela Arnold

Dear Suzanne...

I know there is a story here that everyone can relate to. It may remind women of buying a new dress and finding you also need accessories. At the end, you will see how men might reluctantly relate.

Just two weeks ago, I asked my husband if he would put a new faucet in our downstairs guest bathroom. He said yes but a couple days later, he mentioned the sink was chipped and perhaps we could use a new one. As I walked by the kitchen cupboard section, I stopped to look at the counter tops. (You can guess where this is headed now I'm sure.) I brought some Formica samples home and said that since we were replacing the sink and faucet and the old counter was "tacky", perhaps we could look at new counter tops together. Understand that my husband is color blind and totally uninterested in changing anything which still works; shopping for fun is torture for him. After protesting that we didn't need a new counter, he reluctantly DID come with me and helped pick out a new one.

As I pondered how our 34 year-old wallpaper would look above this new counter, it occurred to me there would be bare spots as the counters were different heights. After removing the wallpaper and paste, I noted the wallboard seams show, the house has settled over the years and there are major spots to fill. Also the walls are smooth so anything not covered by wallpaper will need to be textured (not my job!) I have found and ordered paper and border for the top half of only ONE WALL.

In conclusion, if my story is chosen, I will include pictures of the anticipated finished room. Oh; I would like to add that when said husband "went looking for" rigging for fishing, his purchases turned into much more than he first mentioned. So far, I have not used this tidbit of information.

Your loyal fan,

Faye Daellenbach

Dear Reader,

We were two little girls, six and eight, making the best of our school day mornings. Rising at 5am, we cleaned up, dressed, fed, and were out the door to catch our 6 am Greyhound bus to school. Why? Because that was our family's only transportation option to keep us in our school of choice. In our bleary-eyed state, we sleepily dressed ourselves, often leaving with mis-buttoned sweaters and jackets. Mom made sure we had everything, packed our lunches, checked our school bags. We skipped, more often ran, in the early morning semi-light to the bus stop, waving to younger siblings in the window. Front row seats in the big bus were always vacant for us, nearest the driver. We rode eight miles from

our bus stop in Santa Clara to the Mountain View station, memorizing the announced names of stops and watching passengers board and depart. From the station, the two of us kept to the main street, walking a mile to school, often passed by our Greyhound driver continuing their route. In normal weather, the walk wasn't bad. We did "window shopping" in the closed shops that lined the downtown street. In rainy weather, our Greyhound drivers detoured to our school before going to the station, driving right through the school grounds, to unload us at our classroom doors. What an impression that made! But, if it wasn't raining, the two of us would sludge our way through flooded downtown streets to get to class, often with shoes and socks held high above our heads. Unbeknownst to us, many eyes watched our daily trek, including our family pastor, who occasionally rescued us from knee-high puddles and drove us to school.

There were no cell phones for urgent calls home, no redemption for forgotten papers. This was our morning routine for two years until we moved closer to school.

On today's quiet morning, a slower pace is more than welcome!

Kathleen Stearns

Dear Reader,

It may have started from hearing stories about grandparents who worked on the family farm and "were up each day before the crack of dawn." Or, perhaps it was the commercial and the catch phrase, "we do more before breakfast than most people do all day."

However it was that I got started, I too am now a member of the early risers club. Although my work does not require me to leave the house each morning until just before eight, it is almost for certain that I am awake and out the door many hours before.

These early morning hours have now become "*my hours*." I feel as though I have the world to myself as I walk in the peace and quiet of what is both the end of the night, and the beginning of the new day.

During fall and winter, "*my hours*" are spent in the dark as I walk in the cold crisp air and enjoy the beauty of the night's moon, and heavens still starlit display. I hear a question from my childhood as it echoes from within. "Did you see that?" Heard from afar, as the shooting star streaks across the sky and quickly fades away.

Come spring and summer, "*my hours*" are spent in the cool fresh air as I walk in wonder and see the night turn to day. With beautiful clouds of blue, pink and gold, it is as if the sky is a canvass with a new painting each morn. I listen to the birds as they begin to wake, their morning songs adding sound to the new day.

As with the seasons of the year, our lives change as we walk along our way. It is with joy that I have found “my hours” and in doing so, see the beauty of each new day.

Don Bernitt

Dear Reader,

Scotch-Irish, Pennsylvania Dutch and Bohemian, I’m just a mutt, a true American. Second generation born here for the Scotch-Irish side, not sure about the rest of the family, I’m still researching them. I took a genealogy class once, I still remember the first words the instructor said; don’t look if you can’t deal with what you will find. Everyone has skeletons in their closet. She said many people get upset about the things they find, unwed mothers, suicide, murder, etc.

My father was an example of that, not too far back on his side the mother is listed as Maggie O’Brien (you don’t get more Irish than that), a washer women and no father listed. My father was horrified, he said they just forgot to list the name of the father, he was so sure of that.

But finding and tracking family can also be very rewarding. In 2000 my mother and I went to Scotland. We found the church, St Johns in Glasgow, Scotland, where my Great Grandparents had been married 110 years before. We found the church on Saturday, it wasn’t very inviting from the outside, but we got out of the car anyway and found the times listed for the services on Sunday. We went to Church on Sunday, it was so beautiful and well preserved on the inside. We were a little early for the service and met the minister, she was so friendly and she explained a little of the church’s history. She was sorry she would be unable to meet with us after the service. She had to leave right away to go to another church, but she introduced us to other members of the congregation. They invited us to tea after the service and an Elder of the church showed me the original document my great grandparents had signed. It was the best part of the 10 day trip and a wonderful lasting memory for me of my family history.

Patricia Ann Golding

Dear Reader,

I have to admit that this blank page is scary, but as a book lover, I am motivated by the idea of winning so many great books. I’ve sat on the sidelines the past couple of years, reading about Suzanne’s contest and willing myself to enter, but the cute, witty story never came and I told myself I could never do as

great of a job as Suzanne and her past guest writers.

When did writing become so tough? I remember my freshman English teacher, Mrs. Hurst, walking into class on the first day and without saying a word, writing on the board for the class to start writing our thoughts for the next 5 minutes. After we all looked around at each other wondering whether our teacher was mute, we timidly started writing. At the end of the 5 minutes (that seemed like 30), the teacher got up and introduced herself and explained the benefits of journaling; mentioning that the first 5 minutes of every class would be devoted to journaling. The first couple of days were tough. Then a funny thing happened. We all started writing and couldn't stop! The five minutes that felt like 30 now seemed like 2! I wrote about everything and the thoughts flowed faster than my pen. All the sudden, even research papers flowed, as I realized that starting was the hardest part.

After graduation, I became an accountant and my job required very little writing, all of it technical. Over the years, I never seem to find the time to journal, and have grown rusty and out of practice. It seems such a shame that as we grow up, our world narrows as we are forced to specialize in a career and leave behind the variety and fun of multiple interest and skills. Too bad the work force doesn't allow for a quick game of kickball on the playground, or even 5 minutes a day to journal.

So, Mrs. Hurst, if you are reading this, thanks for the 5 minutes a day you gave us to journal. I don't think I appreciated it then, but I sure do now. And Suzanne, thanks so much for allowing me to relive my college years. And for everyone reading along, it's so good to read (and write) with friends!

Pauline Steffensen

Dear Reader,

I have to admit that when I peruse our local paper, I always take a glance at the obituaries. Age may have something to do with this, being just on the other side of 60. Most days I scan quickly and recognize neither pictures nor names. Once in a great while though I will see a name that jumps out at me, a long ago coworker, a former neighbor, or someone I had worked with on some Church or Community committee. If time and place allow, I usually go and pay my respects.

Well a few weeks ago I saw a name that I felt I had been looking for quite awhile. It was the mother of a guy I had dated in High School. We didn't date too long but he was a nice guy. I had met his family at one point but had no idea if they were still living in the area. Since I hadn't moved far, I always thought I would run into him somewhere, someday, but never did. One reason I never forgot him was because when we were dating he had borrowed my Learn To Draw Kit, in which I had several pictures I had done and valued, not being any kind of an artist myself.

We stopped dating, I met my husband now of 42 years and my Learn To Draw Kit never got returned. I decided to visit the funeral home and pay my respects out of our old friendship. As things worked out, he wasn't there at the time, but I did get to talk with his sister and left a card with my name and address and a note expressing my sympathy. Don't know if I will ever hear from him, but if I do I am wondering if I can keep from asking him if he still has my Learn to Draw Kit.

Patricia Cameron

Dear Reader,

Three years ago.

We met at a coffee house. I stood next to my car as I watched him pull in. These dating sites don't give near enough information I thought in frustration. He got out of his truck and walked over and said hello with a southern twang that would make even the most seasoned southerner wince. I sighed. Not my type I thought, but I'm here so I'll at least go in and get a cup of coffee with him. After all, he did take the time to meet me. I'll be out in 30 minutes tops I thought to myself and at least I'm not home alone with the dog and TV again!

Four hours later we walked out together. Wow! What an impression he made on me. We hugged goodnight and got in our separate vehicles.

Driving home I wondered if he would call me. Probably not I thought. Way too nice for me. I never get the nice guys. I don't have that kind of radar.

The next day was full of meetings and I didn't get a chance to look at my cell until late afternoon. First thing I noticed was that there was a message. Could it be from him?

My fingers kind of tingled as I pressed the buttons on the phone. Sure enough it was from him. Telling me he had a good time last night and would like to go out again and how about dinner Saturday night? His voice was confident yet tentative at the same time. Why he's a nervous as I am, I thought. Why did that twang suddenly seem so unimportant?

I called him back and we met for dinner that Saturday night. I look back now and smile to myself. He was so sweet. So nice. So polite. I so enjoyed myself.

The kids liked him. The dog liked him. My friends liked him. I loved him.

We had a beautiful Christmas wedding. When he said I do his voice was like music to my ears.

Present time.

We have now been married 8 months and I love him more each day.

Not a bad ending to "he's not my type".

Dianna Williamson

Dear Reader,

My mother was the most beautiful person I ever met in my life. All my life, I tried to live under her guidance and wishes. My mother grew up in a small town in Kerala, the southern most state of India. She was so passionate about helping people and wanted to go to nursing school. But her father didn't allow her to do that. According to him the girls are supposed to get married and raise a family. After finishing high school, she got married to my father.

Her dream about working never became true after she got married. She had three kids, two boys and I. She made sure that her children has been inspired enough to stand on their own two feet, especially me. She always gave importance to her husband and her kids. The great thing about her was her beautiful smile. She always told me "never give up your dreams", and "with hard work and god's help, you will be able to achieve anything in life". That advice has helped me to become who I am now. A girl from a remote village in India is now in United States working as a project manager for one of the best financial firms in the country.

The sad thing is that she is not here to celebrate any of my accomplishments. Two months after I came to this country; she passed away. I have lost her to Leukemia at the age of 45. But, I was glad that she could see my departure to United States which she was very excited about. I wanted to have a girl baby after I got married because I wanted to bring her up the same way as my mother did. After going through several infertility treatments, dealing with endometriosis, and having a stroke, my reproductive organs were taken out. But, I am happy because I believe that everything is happening for a reason. I feel that I live the life my mother didn't have and she did take care of us so much fulfilling my role also as a mother.

There is anything in the world which can replace my mother's love, she is still with me in her spirit, and I will cherish her as long as I live.

Sindhu Jaideep Manuvalil

Suzanne,

Just look what you've done...

A co-worker of mine suggested Suzanne's website to me a number of years ago because she knew I enjoyed reading. So I was anxious to look into this. The first book I ever read on the website was "Sullivan's Island" by Dorothea Benton Frank. I enjoyed the book tremendously. It's the tale of a woman who goes back to her hometown of Sullivan's Island, in South Carolina after her marriage breaks up and she faces dealing with all aspects of her life. At the time, I was also going through a divorce and some hard times myself. I could relate to this story so much. Now I understand there is a sequel to the book, "Return to Sullivan's Island" and I can't wait to read it.

After reading "Sullivan's Island" I realized it's one of my all time favorite books and now I recommend the book to every book lover I meet. I have also given the book to people I feel are going through a hard time for one reason or another. Everyone has loved the book that I have passed it on to.

I also tell everyone about Suzanne's website and about all the great opportunities they will discover here. (Since she's on vacation I'll just take this opportunity to talk about her.) As we all know, it's not just about the books, but readers will meet a new friend in Suzanne also. Don't forget all the good feelings she brings to readers, along with homemade cookies she bakes for her readers and the yummy recipes she shares.

My co-worker gave me a truly special gift when she introduced me to Suzanne. So yes Suzanne, just look what you've done...you have touched so many people in so many positive ways by sharing your website treasures. Thank you for all you do.

Always an avid reader,
Trish Painter

Dear Reader,

I will soon be eighty two;
I know my days are nearing the end,
Wondering what the Lord would have me do.
Heaven and earth are beginning to blend.

I am trying to tell the story of my family
for those who care.
Few want to know about the past,
until they are old, alas!

Someone said "life must be understood backwards,
but must be lived forward."

As most families, we had some great folks,
a few not so great.
But as a relative, you love them all...
the short and tall.

Now we are blessed with two little greats,
I am already praying for Christian mates.
The world they are born into is making
lots of mistakes.

There is still beauty around us,
but it is getting harder to see.
Liquor, drugs and pornography,
what will it be?

I look forward to going to heaven,
why do some fear to die?
Maybe they do not know Him
who is preparing our place in the sky!

Billie Anne Echols

Dear Reader,

I basically had a “Leave It to Beaver” childhood. My father was the breadwinner and Mother worked only a short time while I was growing up. She wasn’t waiting in her pearls and high heels frosting a cake when I came home from school each day, but she was there for me when I got home. She has always been there for my two sisters and me. During each summer that we were young, we would each have “our day”. This was once a month (we had a maid who would baby sit the others) where we could go anywhere we wanted with Mother and spend the day with her. What joyful, carefree days those were as I reflect back upon them now.

Now, the tide has turned. My sweet mother, who fought and won against breast cancer eleven years ago, is now in the fight of her life with lung cancer. The terrible irony of it all is that she has never smoked but was married to a smoker for 47 years until his death. She has accepted her plight with quiet dignity and strong faith. She doesn’t complain and when she does have a bad day, she tries to minimize it so we don’t worry. She has never gotten angry at God and railed against Him like many in her situation would.

One night as I was visiting her recently, I took some yarn over that had been horribly tangled by a wayward dog. Some stitches had been dropped from a sweater I was knitting. When I was younger, I never wanted her to fix anything I was working on because I wanted every stitch to be my own. How silly and petty that seems now. As she sat beside me helping me untangle the knotted mess, I reflected on how thankful I was that she was still there to help me with things. Not just knitting problems, but many of the issues we face in life. Funny how our perspective changes, isn’t it?

Sadly, she lost her battle against lung cancer earlier this year. I lost my best friend and counselor. I am forever changed by the grace and courage she demonstrated while in the final year of her life. I am blessed to have had her as my mother.

Kathy Kelley

Dear Reader:

I have always been a vivid dreamer. I dream in color, have wild adventures and for a little time after I wake up I am aware of the dreams. I have explored new worlds or lived in some of my favorite fictional ones. Whenever I have a problem or something is bothering me or I'm just too tired and stressed I dream ways to relieve the stress.

But my current dream stress relief is going to get me in trouble. As of today I have not smoked for 7 months, 20 days and about 5 hrs. I was a 30+ year smoker and I knew I had to quit. I am planning to go on the trip of a lifetime, but it entails a 7 hour transatlantic flight that I am nervous enough about. I do not need to be craving a cigarette when we are over the Arctic Circle.

But in my current dream stress relief state I get a cigarette. A wonderful tasting (not at all sour or bitter) cigarette and I smell the smoke and it reminds me of wonderful things. My lungs inhale deeply and it calms me right down. Whatever was making me crazy is immediately better. The downside is that when I wake up I feel like I actually smoked the cigarette!

So far I have not thrown a coat over my pjs and run out to the gas station, but I wonder how long this will hang on. When I am awake and busy I don't need the cigarettes, which I know will not taste that good, or the patches which itched; and I take walks when the job related stress gets too much. Why do I still need a cigarette in my dreams?

Maybe it's not that I need one, but that I get one, as a reward. I will not smoke anymore in awake time, but in dream time it can't hurt me, slow me down, or make me addicted again. I can just relax and enjoy it.

I'm sure that eventually I will go back to mountain climbing on other worlds or playing with the kids (who are grownups with their own kids) and just having fun. I will not miss my dream smoking when I finally give it up there too.

Kathleen Cuthbert

Dear Reader,

Behind our condo in Indianapolis, there is an old railroad track that has been converted to a walking/biking trail. On the other side of the trail is a nature preserve. The trail crosses over the local river twice near where we live. When I walk on the trail, I often see big turtles floating in the sun, or stacked on top of each other on a log. There is a great blue heron who stands poised in the shallows.

A few days ago I saw a pileated woodpecker. It was as big as a duck! About 6 blocks north of us, the trail comes close to an intersection of 2 streets with a traffic light. One morning as I approached the intersection, a deer crossed the street at the light when it was green for her. I thought it was weird but delightful that the deer picked that spot to cross the street, and waited for the green light. On days when I dread going out for exercise, because I'm lazy, I remember these encounters with wildlife and I get up and go with hope for another one.

Jill Brown

Dear Reader,

My Mom was a special lady. I had the privilege of living with her for the last years of her life. She had

seven children and we all made it to adulthood healthy, happy and without any marks on our “permanent record”. After her passing, I also had the job of sorting through her personal things. This was not a job I was looking forward to for I missed her terribly. I had not only lost my Mom but also my best friend. But hard as it was, I knew it had to be done.

My Mom did not easily throw anything away. If I tried to sneak something to the curb for trash pickup, many times by the time I returned home from work, she had drug it back from the curb because “someone may need it”. Needless to say, there was a lot to sort through. I soon discovered she had saved many things from our childhood: baby books, scapulars and missals (does anyone remember them?), school and sports programs, old newspaper clippings, drawings we had made her for mother’s day, report cards from first grade through high school, letters from one brother when he served in Vietnam and more pictures of all of us than you can imagine.

I wondered what I would do with her “life savings”. As the holidays approached, I had an idea. I divided everything between the seven of us and gave my siblings a “Treasure Box” from my Mom for Christmas. All of my brothers and sisters were surprised and thrilled when they opened the box and discovered all of the things our mom had saved over the years.

Treasure can be money or gold or jewels. Treasure can be winning the Lottery or the Mega Millions. Heck, treasure can even be your car keys after searching for ten minutes. Treasure is different for all of us. My Mom had the uncanny ability to make us feel so special and we never ever doubted that we were loved, but I will never forget the Christmas when we discovered that “WE” were her Treasure.

Toni Grodi

Dear Reader,

You asked us to write for you. The topic I have chosen is a hard one for me. Being Gramma Gramma and Grammy.

I currently have six grandchildren and am blessed to have number seven due in only five weeks. Of those six, four belong to Rachel and Troy, my daughter and son-in-law. Their children call me Gramma Gramma. There is a good reason for this, but it brings a tug of sadness to my heart. Their paternal grandma does not get to see them nearly as often as she'd like. I will not go into the reasons behind this, because the story would be too long.

Our oldest grandchild was three before he realized that she too was his grandmother. He looked at me thoughtfully one day and asked if his dad's mom was his grandma too. I told him, "Yes, she is and she loves you very much. She wishes she could see you more often." It was at that moment he declared, "Gramma, you're my Gramma gramma and she's my New Gramma!" Happily, she enjoys the name as it is unique. Her life has been gradually changing and she has been able to see them a bit more often as late. During those times I try to stay away as much as possible so she can have them to herself.

My other two grandchildren are the daughters of my son Joseph and his wife Rebecca. To them I am simply Gramma and/or Grammy. Ever since my grandchildren were born I have sung them each the same song: You're my favorite (their name), you're the (name) I love. They have all loved this song and that is why they would sometimes use the term "Grammy." They would sing it to me with Grammy and

Rebecca's mom with Grandma. A few years ago, Rebecca's mom passed away. Now they sing the song to me both ways and my heart grieves a little each time, even as it sings for joy in their love for me. However, they know their Grandma is in heaven and that they will see her again one day, so they are able to talk about her and smile, even when singing the song.

Thanks for listening. It helps to "talk" about it.

Sherry Simino

Dear Reader,

Late one night the phone rang. The feeling of dread materialized. I live in Boston. Bruno, my 92-year-old father lived in Costa Rica. Late night calls were never good. Bruno had been hospitalized with an infection in his legs.

The hospital's main number did not accept long-distance calls. After several frantic hours, I got through on his nurse's cell phone. My father was on IV antibiotics and doing well. He should be able to go home in a few days. "Did I want to talk to him?" the nurse asked.

During admission, he had bitten two of the nurses. To avoid a repeat performance, they had removed his dentures. Bruno was a strong, proud and stubborn man, but he had one fear: being hospitalized. He was certain that if that day ever came, he would die in his hospital bed.

Without dentures, he was not very easy to understand, especially via cell phone, thousands of miles away. I think he said he loved me. In retrospect, maybe those were the words I wanted to hear. I did not know at the time that we would never talk to each other again—at least not in the conventional sense. My father died suddenly 4 days later, on the eve of his discharge.

Two months later, I am standing on a hill. My high school gym is all lit up and people are here to attend my father's wake. My cell phone rings and a very familiar voice says, "Ciao, Monica". It's my father. The first words out of my mouth are, "You do realize you are dead, right? We are at your wake!" Yes, he tells me, he knows he is dead, but he wanted me to know he had found my mother and they were doing well. "I am pregnant", I blurt out. Yes, he knew that too and all would be well with the baby. He said good-bye to me and asked to speak to someone else, a close family friend who was going through some rough times.

That's when I woke up—a smile on my face and fresh tears on my cheeks.

I realized then that my father had given me the greatest gift of all—a chance to say good-bye.

Respectfully submitted by,
Monica Bruno

Dear Reader,

My son is only two years old and already I have high hopes for what he will accomplish with his life. While I of course hope for big things for him, I also hope for the small gratifications and personal touches that this life has to offer that we as busy people too often over look. I remember back in 9th grade, my English teacher noticed how much I adored reading. She made it her personal responsibility to make sure that I was able to explore my passion for reading to the fullest extent. She talked to my other teachers, and eventually I was allowed to swap out my homeroom time for an extra English class with her. Oh, how I adored her! At Christmas time, she presented me with the best gift I could have imagined--my own personal copy of "Gone With The Wind" with a hand written note from her on the inside cover. To this day, I have that very copy of the book! It is much worn, and while I could easily replace the book, I could never replace the memory that goes along with it. I only hope that one day, my son will also share my joy in reading and that he too will have an outside influence to encourage him like she encouraged me. She didn't have to take the time to do the things she did for me, but because she did my life was forever changed by the magic of the written word. Too often we don't take time for the small pleasures in life, but your column Suzanne never fails to excite me when I see it. Thanks for helping to keep my interest piqued at all times, and for following in my favorite teachers footsteps!

Jessica Keep

Dear Reader,

The summer my husband died, I would sit at the kitchen table and stare at the backyard bird feeder and watch the birds. He had been ill for a long time and loved to sit at the table with his book "North American Birds" and binoculars watching the birds. I was depressed and everything was a dull gray except for my kids and the birds.

One day an itty bitty fur ball scampered over and ate some of the dropped seeds from the feeders. It scampered back and soon reappeared with a "twin". They ate a bit and returned home to fetch a third. Mamma Squirrel appeared and scolding chased them all home. It became my habit to watch for them {the feast was just more tempting than Mamma's scolding}. They were my "Boys". I felt my heart sink one day as I noticed a tiny bit of fur under the big maple. I waited for it to move and it didn't. As I slowly got up to retrieve what I was sure was another dead thing in my life, it moved, slowly stretched, and resumed eating only to stretch out on a root this time to nap. It was doing what my own babies had done--falling asleep at the table and eating in their sleep.

They played tag with the bunnies, learned to climb down trees, enjoyed their first snow and were regulars at the feeders. I found myself sneaking treats just for the Boys into the food I would scatter for the ground birds much to the amusement of my kids. As I watched them and laughed the gray slowly receded and faded like the fog it felt like.

This summer we had to move. I regretted having to leave my Boys behind. I even considered "live trapping" them and taking them with me. I didn't of course. I didn't realize how much I missed them till I looked up and through the window I saw a squirrel sitting on the railing looking in like the Boys used to do. I am already planning on a bag of peanuts and corn on the cob for him. Sometimes I think the "fog" will never lift completely but my Boys sure lightened it, and I am thankful for that.

Charmaine Spradlin

Hi Suzanne,

I thought this sounded like a fun idea, but it wasn't until this morning that inspiration struck. Well it really started in the middle of the night last night when a loud, vicious and beautiful storm struck our area. Secretly (as I always do) I hoped that it would last at least until morning for my commute to work. Most people say that dark, stormy days make them depressed. I am the complete opposite!! Whenever I see the sky start to darken and hear the thunder gently rumbling in the distance, my heart does a little pitter-patter. Something about the darkness and the rain and just it's natural power, not to mention the beauty that is nature and the entirely different life it takes on before, during, and after a storm, touches me to the deepest part of my soul. I will purposely go out and run errands, whether I need to or not, just to be a part of the beautiful experience.

I could go on and on about how absolutely happy storms make me. Will the power go out? Can I light a bunch of candles and read a book in the dark? Curl up with the dog and soft blanket...of course, in my fantasy world, the baby is down for a perfectly timed nap so that I can enjoy this experience without the distraction of his business :) But I thought it would be fun, especially this morning while I'm being consumed by the storm surrounding the metroplex, to share my thoughts on this special subject. Maybe I'm not the only person out there who gets such an other-worldly pleasure from something as simple as a thunderstorm? Either way, thank you for letting me share my feelings this morning.

Bethany

Dear Reader,

Friday, August 21st our little Gracie will be 4 months old. We have had her for one month and I can honestly say she has changed our lives. One wouldn't think a little Havanese puppy could be so emotionally invasive, or give so much joy. My husband (who wasn't real crazy about the idea) and I could not imagine life without her. Well, maybe he could.

Gracie came to us from Broken Arrow, Oklahoma and I was very concerned about shipping her so far. We live in Arizona and the night Gracie came in it was 100 degrees. I was worried, but I prayed she would not be scared or uncomfortable. Yes, I really did pray for a dog! We went to the airport at 10pm to pick her up. The rules demand pups be shipped at night in Arizona during the summer months due to the heat. We were happy to accommodate that rule.

There were 11 dogs to be picked up and we started talking to everyone there. One was picking up a Great Dane, another, a terrier and so on. It was amazing how we all had camaraderie among us. The biggest dogs were brought in front and the little ones in the back. We spotted Gracie and she had a look of concern and "wonder what's going on" look, but she seemed peaceful, I thought, "Thank you Lord". I kept making eye contact with Gracie, so she would know I was her new Mommy.

She didn't want to come out of her cage—so we left the door open—she put her little paw out and then another. She was pensive and moved real slow. I held her all the way home and she put her head against my shoulder.

We had a little pink bed for her but she wanted to be held, she whimpered and cried, so my husband says, "let her sleep with us". Oh Mister, she is not to sleep in our bed! She slept between us and we did not sleep a wink, worried we would roll over on her. Neither of us minded one bit. She was so tiny and beautiful.

Stay tuned for the rest of the story....

Sincerely,
Your comrade in reading!
Bonnie L Johnson

Dear Suzanne,

I've been thinking about what to write and send you for a column.

I decided I would write about how and when my love for books started.

When I was in grade school and learning how to read, I fell in love with books and our town's library which is named Morley library. I remember going to story hours there and how thrilled I was to get my own library card!

I am now almost 80 and I still love to read and enjoy our library. I have developed cataracts on both my eyes so it has become more difficult to read. I had the one on my left eye removed on 8/12/09 and am waiting for it to heal and then will have the right one removed. If all goes well, I will be able to read easily again.

Just a short note about my family. My husband Bernard & I have been married 61 years on 8/28/09. We have 6 sons, 4 dtrs in-law, 13 grandchildren of which 6 are married and 7 great grandchildren with another on the way. Needless to say, when we all get together, it's hectic and a lot of fun!!

I look forward to your blogs each day and LOVE READING WITH YOU!!

Sincerely,
Marge O'Leary

Dear Reader,

So last night was my first night of racquetball. I joined a league through our local rec center. I thought to myself, "Self, you don't belong in a beginner league. You were captain of your tennis team! You know your strokes. How to hit a shot. What a winner is. You need to sign up for Intermediate."

And so began my downfall...

I show up about 15 minutes before game time. No idea what I am doing and the rules are a bit murky. I am standing with the other 15 members of the league and the guy that runs the show walks straight up

to me and says "Hi, Brian." I look around uncomfortably. Look at my shirt for a name tag. Wonder if my wife had tattooed my name on my forehead in my sleep. Something to tip him off. Then, baffled, I say "how do you know who I am?" To which he says "you are the only unfamiliar face."

And so began my downfall...

Won 2 lost 3 in my debut. I am happy to say that I was able to get out of bed this morning, but thankful I have a desk job and am able to sit most of the day today. I was having flashbacks of conditioning practices in high school for football and basketball. I remembered guys vomiting after those practices. Thankfully that did not happen, but I am not going to say it didn't cross my mind...

After one of my matches, which I am not sure because I was light-headed, I walked up to the head guy and told him that if I had known it was "pick on the fat kid night, I would not have signed up." He just laughed. That was not helpful.

I get home and I look like I had just jumped in a pool fully clothed. My wife immediately laughs and says "I can't wait until the day after tomorrow to hear how sore you are!" And then she squealed with excitement and laughter. I took off my shirt for the laundry and asked "am I thinner?" "Svelte" she says, still laughing through tears.

Thankfully for now, I have a desk job...

Brian Lammer

Dear Reader,

I'm trying to let go. Really. I am. My daughter who is a sophomore in high school is smart, confident, and kind. So why am I always trying to "improve" her? She far exceeds who I was at that age. This summer she had a labor-intensive job making beds, as well as volunteering at the zoo, which meant very little sleeping in (and for a teenager, those hours sleeping are as valuable as gold). She plays piano and flute. She enjoys playing sports. She is a good kid. So what's the problem?

It is too easy for me to be critical and to want her to do even more, be even smarter, play more instruments, score a perfect 1600 on her SATs and the list goes on. The logical part of me knows that these are unrealistic ideals. And I do not (you can even ask her!) make her feel the level of pressure that I feel inside me. But I do let out little comments and try to be her micromanager ("Shouldn't you finish that book?" "Why don't you work on that report?" "You should try out for the tennis team.") Honestly, if our roles were reversed, I'd probably run out of the house screaming.

So I am trying to let her be her own manager. Let her grow, make decisions, make mistakes, and figure out life herself. That does not mean that I will not be there to guide her (that's the operational word "guide," not "do", "nag", etc.). And it will not happen overnight. I will still feel anxiety when I think she should do something or do it differently or better (my interpretation). I will still wake up in the middle of the night worrying about her. And coming up with solutions to all her woes. Although interestingly enough, when I ask her about the woes that I think she been suffering, in actuality, she hasn't; only I have!

Giving birth is hard; giving a child the opportunity to grow and become independent is harder. Much harder.

Sharon Ruthven

Dear Reader,

As a full time working mom I try really hard to make a dinner that is as healthy as possible, but as any mom will tell you there are just days when you don't have the energy to make a "good" dinner. The term "good" is all relative though as I found out the other night. To me a "good" dinner is something I put some effort into right? To my kids it's something entirely different.

After a long day at work, I asked my 2 and 4 year olds what they wanted for dinner-my oldest pipes up, "noodle soup!" Good choice I think as I get up to boil some water. I scrounged around in the refrigerator for something else to go with it and managed to find some left over carrots, fruit and some flavored fruit dip that they hadn't tasted yet. This was not my idea of a "good" dinner, but I figured it could have been worse. I sat everything down on the table and my oldest went right for the fruit dip, of course, with his fork as I tried to tell him to eat it with the fruit. The youngest went for the soup first "good boy!" All in all, they both actually ended up eating most of everything I put out, even the carrots --which for me was a small victory--but the icing on the cake was when my oldest jumped up from the table and ran over to me and said "Mommy, I just have to give you a kiss for this good dinner you made me!" Well, of course, my eyes welled-up and I gave him a big hug and kiss.

It may not have been the healthiest dinner I've ever set before my kids, but at least there was no whining or fighting with them to eat. So as I found out "good" is all in the eye of the beholder and thanks to noodle soup and fruit dip dinner WAS good mainly because the time we spent together was fun. These items will definitely make a repeat appearance on those nights when I'm just too tired to make a "good" dinner and I'll once again be a hero in my kids' eyes!

Teresa Emenheiser

Dear Reader,

I love to cook and bake—from Apple Brownies to homemade Lasagna, and so many more dishes in between. I used to love the idea of baking using tiny little custard cups full of pre-measured flour, salt, and sugar. (Never, of course, putting any thought to how many dirty dishes this would create in the end!) I scoured cookbooks and baked potential candidates in my mind, planning out dinners and imagining their presentation on the table.

I always felt very grown up and mature cooking and baking for my family. I lived for my family's reactions after that first bite, and loved my Grandmother's approval—she was such an inspiration to me in the kitchen. That woman is the MacGuyver of Meals...followed by dessert! I loved to cook with her and learn from her methods. Cooking and baking had become a stress reliever, my ultimate pastime and pleasure. (Aside from reading, of course!)

Then I had kids.

At first it was innocent “help”. Nothing too terrible, right? Yet, the older they got, the more eager to help Mom in the kitchen, the more weary I was with the fun.

“That's MY CHAIR!”

“He's pushing me!”

“I want to STIRrrr-waaaah!”

Cooking went from relaxing to focusing on getting meals on the table—still made from scratch, a little quicker perhaps—plus occasional baking, fun desserts, and sweets for family time. Eagerly, I ushered the children in and hoped that this time would be better, perhaps we could share just one chair between the apron-wearing 3 and 5 year old chefs in our small cave of a kitchen? Maybe this time they'd be satisfied with just saying, “GO!” and letting me dump in the ingredients? Maybe we could even take turns?

Don't get me wrong—I think cooking and baking with children is a wonderful, and important, way to create memories, to let them feel proud of their work and appreciated. If only there was a way to do so without flouring the kitchen floor or watching them eat half the cookie dough before they've hit the oven! For now I'll settle for smiling through help with dinner—it always gets finished, right?—and sometimes winning my mini victory of baking after bedtime.

Melissa Wagner

Dear Reader,

When I was growing up, I always remember being both excited and nervous on the first day of school. I wanted each school year to be the best year ever. I worried about doing well in my classes and hoped that my teachers were nice. I had nightmares about getting to school the first day and not knowing where I was going or what class I was supposed to be in, but everything always turned out okay. When I went to college, there was the panic of living away from home for the first time and the overwhelming size of the school I was attending. Each year my worry was for naught and everything went just fine.

I graduated from college with a degree in education and then the fears all changed. I worried about where I was going to live and where I was going to work. Soon I found a job at an elementary school.

The first day of school approached quickly. As I set up my classroom, I once again felt the anticipation of the new school year and all of the alarming emotions that went with the first day of school. I now had nightmares about my students not following my directions or of students going out of control in the classroom. A fellow teacher who had been teaching for more than 20 years told me my first year that he still got nervous on the first day of school. He told me that every child feels just like I did when I was a kid on the first day of school. They are afraid and hope for a great school year, just like I did.

I have been teaching for several years now and I still remember his words. As the first day of school once again approaches, I remember that they are just as scared as I am and that they wish for a wonderful year just like I do.

I am hoping for another great school year and I wish the same to all my fellow teachers and of course the students and parents as well!

Shelly Lynch

Dear Reader,

I'm turning forty in two weeks. The big "4-0". The "F" word. Lately my mind has been overflowing with all the wonder it will bring--menopause, mood swings, wrinkles, weight gain and another decade closer to my senior citizens membership.

My mind contemplates what I've been doing with my time these past thirty-nine years: graduating high school, then college, starting my career, then college again and changing my career. Making friends and losing friends. Then along came marriage and kids and all the wonder of raising them. I think ahead to what is yet to be and it doesn't seem as exciting as what has already been. But as the big date quickly closes in, I decide to take another look. Does it have to be so bad? I mean really, I'm going to be FORTY. It can't be all that bad can it? People will take me seriously now. I'm confident, experienced and full of life. I can do whatever I choose to put my mind to. I can wear what I want and be friends with the kind of people that lift me up and care about me. I will see my children turn into teenagers this decade. I can volunteer my time and talents to help other people out. I have talents yet to discover. Who knows, maybe I'll learn to play that violin I've been dreaming about for several decades. All it takes is a new outlook on life and the wisdom and confidence of a forty year old to try new things.

Yep, the big "4-0", the "F" word. It doesn't seem so scary now. The possibilities are endless.

Tari Clayton

Dear Reader,

Most people I know prefer warm sunny days. Days that allow them to go to the beach walk in the woods or picnic with friends or family. Rain is accepted during times of drought or a heat wave with the expectation of getting back to warm pleasant days. Perhaps we should reevaluate our priorities about nice days and look at the benefits of a rainy day.

The Irish call a rainy day a "soft day". Americans put great stock in the quality of softness: skin, diapers, puppies, kittens and toilet paper. I would like to add a soft day to this list.

Acknowledging the benefits of rain to replenish drinking water, nourishment for crops and cleaning the air, there are other benefits. A soft day can be a time of renewal, refreshment and relaxation. A sunny day often finds members of the family going in many directions like an uncovered pan of popping corn. A soft day can be used to gather yourself together.

The tomorrows we have put aside can now be today. A book we've promised ourselves to read, an unwritten letter, the half finished project, a treasured record album, a day of nothing. A soft day is filled with gentle soothing sounds that escape us during our busyness on a sunny day. Air is denser on a soft

day and the birds singing are heard with greater clarity, if we learn to listen. Many sounds are unique to a soft day. Rain drops falling from leaf to leaf, sounding like a multitude of miniscule drums. Sheets of rain sweeping across the rooftops, making cymbal like sounds on its way down the drainpipes. Tear shaped drops spattering on the ground with a plopping sound join the symphony in nature's musical.

In this technical society we are bombarded with sounds and have learned to turn them off in order to survive. This defense serves us well, but we have also turned off the sounds that can bring music into our lives. A soft day can be a journey of renewal. We don't have to keep it outside. We can be food to ourselves and bring this soft day inside. A new day with a new look, inside and out.

Constance P. Harmon

Dear Reader,

I have a confession to make about a secret addiction; we all have something that we find irresistible. Some of us cannot resist a sale the thought of a bargain causes our adrenaline to surge through our veins almost making us dizzy. While others cannot resist the sweet, luscious, mouth-watering allure of chocolate melting in their mouths the endorphins lightening their mood. It's true that I am magically drawn to sale signs. So what if the sale is on toilet bowl brushes because you never know when you might run out of brushes. And chocolate, well, according to recent studies dark chocolate is actually good for us. Isn't it wonderful?

However, as much as these things appeal to me there is one thing I cannot resist. Whenever I start to pass a stack of books on sale I am frozen in my tracks there must be a magical homing device in the pages that draws me back. Unable to resist I paw through the pile in search of the one book that will complete my collection, the one that I must have. I'm hooked on books, yes, folks my name's Vickie and I am a "book addict." If I tried to stop buying books the withdrawal symptoms would be too painful to endure.

Of course my mother is to blame for my addiction. When I was a child she read books to me all of the time. On my tenth birthday, she gave me my first mystery book a "Nancy Drew" mystery. Since that time mysteries have been my favorite books.

Curling up in a comfortable chair or on a couch with a good book is one of life's greatest pleasures. Solving mysteries along with an intrepid sleuth, getting chills and feeling the goose-bumps starting to form as the heroine in a gothic novel is being stalked by an unknown terror hoping to escape unscathed; it doesn't get any better than this. Books entertain us, inform us, instruct us, and provide a gateway to adventure.

If I ever win the million dollar lottery I will build my dream home. The most important room in the house will be the library a room with sturdy wooden bookshelves reaching from floor to ceiling. After all a home without books is an empty home.

Vickie Tierney

Dear Reader,

My good friend Sheila has died. All the shared lunches and laughter of 18 years came to an end two years ago. When she first received her diagnosis of ovarian and colon cancer, I thought for sure she was stronger than the cancer was. Turned out, I was wrong. After much chemo and radiation it was clear that she was losing her battle. She made the decision to check herself into the hospital three weeks before she passed on. Sheila didn't have any children and her Mother and Father had both passed away from cancer 10 years previously. I went to visit often and on one occasion brought my son, Chris with me. He waited for me in the large lobby of the hospital. They had the little gift stores and a nice coffee shop where he waited patiently. Off to the side was a small roped off area that was under construction. A "wet paint" sign warned of some freshly painted rails. My son then said to me "How come they don't have "dry paint" signs." Very funny. That's the one thing I could count on with Chris, he always maintained his sense of humor. There was a sign above Sheila's bed that one of her friends had put up. It said "Be Yourself-Everyone Else is Taken". I thought it was very touching.

They say that cancer is a part of everyone's DNA. For some of us, the lucky ones, it remains dormant during our whole life. For others it surfaces and explodes into a roller coaster of grief and pain. It has been two years since Sheila has passed, and I still miss talking to her. The other day when I ran into a mutual friend of ours, the first thing that came to mind was to call her. Then I thought-oh God-I can't call her-she's dead. I have heard it said that death ends a life and not a relationship. In that instant I realized that it was so true.

Bernita Madott

DearReader,

I don't remember learning to swim. I don't remember learning to read either. Both abilities came to me as naturally as opening my eyes to light or closing them to darkness. Moving through water or interpreting symbols as words were natural gifts.

I have to confess that I became a reading addict at an early age. At the age of three,I remember reading the backs of cereal boxes while munching my big bowl of morning cornflakes. On our family car trips through the countryside, I drove my older sister crazy by reading all the billboards & traffic signs aloud. I loved the Burma Shave funny verses on the side of the highway on the rural roads.

I can remember snuggling under the covers with a flashlight & my favorite book so I could sneak in a few extra chapters after lights out at bed time. My favorite trip was always to the local library. And nothing was more exciting to me than to check out a new book & begin an adventure into different lives & interesting destinations to exotic places far from my ordinary life. It was like a feast of life.

I have always had magazines & books in several rooms of the house to pick up & read & one or two paperbacks in my purse when waiting for the doctor or auto repairman. Now, having lived three quarters of a century, it is a joy to have, in addition to printed materials, books on tape or disk or online and an electronic reader capable of downloading a book, newspaper or magazine at the push of a button. Now I am never without a reading "fix" or have to resort to the back of cereal boxes or highway signs to feed my habit.

I still love visits to the library ,but I do miss the old clever Burma Shave ads!

Mary A Black

Dear Reader,

He let them all down. It was not just himself that was hurt by his actions. The pain and grief he caused affected them all, without exclusion. The ripples of consequence went out in all directions and seemed to have no end.

It was more than disappointment. There was so much anticipation because they had waited so long. The expectations were high, perhaps even unrealistic. They had been talking, making plans, they could visualize it and almost taste it. The anticipation had raised a spirit among them that drew them closer together, which caused even more pain when reality crashed down on them.

It wasn't that he normally let them down. They had depended on him for many years, without fail. They would usually call him trustworthy, steadfast, faithful, and responsible. But just when it counted the most, he failed. Why did it have to be this time, this situation.

Could there ever be a second chance? A possibility to redeem himself? A way to make it right? Could he ever atone for what he put them through? Could he ever recover their faith in him? Would this totally sever the relationship that took a lifetime to build? Was reparation or restitution required, or even possible?

Why didn't Dad order the fries well done?

Doug Haas

Dear Reader,

Falling in love at my age? Never again would have been my solid answer. New love is for the young-- holding hands, soft kisses, and feelings of passion. Who has energy for this past-time while you're busy with careers, kids, and life's obligations. And then, honestly, I didn't see it even sneaking up on me. Meeting someone for a casual friendship encounter turned my safe and secure world upside down. All of a sudden, I'm feeling like an adolescent once again. I'm as giddy as a teenager. And loving every minute of it! Granted we discuss more adult topics (kids, jobs) and realize that our time together must be skated around so many other life schedules. We savor our moments together, and now at our age, realize perhaps we are meant to be together for the duration of time. We can look at our future together when the kids are gone (or are they ever?) and realize that our lives may be dotted with grandchildren. Realizing that life is definitely a finite number now, not the "endless love" we focused on in our youth. We decide it has taken us years to find our true soul mate and realize had we passed in our youth we might not have connected. We appreciate each other and know life doesn't have to be about having fun but instead enjoying each other's company. Falling in love at my age? Are you kidding--it's the best thing that's happened to me in life!

Sheri Ramirez

Dear Reader,

This morning I sit with my mother in the multipurpose room of the nursing home where she now lives. She's hunched over a small bowl of Rice Krispies. Mama pushes the cereal with her spoon, but doesn't eat any. A tall, lanky woman is the only other person sitting at our table. The woman, an earnest expression on her wrinkled face, tells me, "They took away my food before I had a chance to eat it." Her reedy voice cracks, and I'm afraid she'll begin to cry. I know she's pleading for my help. I'm about to approach a staff member about this when the woman turns to Mama and says, "John, they took away my food. John, aren't you going to do anything about my food?"

Although she is deaf, Mama has somehow understood the gist of the woman's comment. My mother turns to me, a disgusted look on her face, and mouths the words, "What's wrong with her?"

In this brief gesture, I see my real mother, the woman she used to be. How many times over the years have I seen those eyebrows furrow and the lips slide into a frown due to something that has irked her?

Soon, a physical therapist comes in and we all toss a beach ball to each other, everyone having several turns. I notice that Mama outshines everyone in this exercise. A few times she slams the ball across the room.

As I watch my mother, I remember how she was when I was a child. I recall playing with my Hula Hoop. Mama wants a turn. She slides the hoop over her middle and keeps it rotating around her hips. In another flashback, we play jump rope. One end of the rope is tied around the maple tree in our front yard. Mama swings the other end while I jump and recite the jumping rhymes I've learned in the school yard. But that was long ago.

Today we're in a nursing home so far from my childhood home, so many years away from the mother I once knew. I watch her enjoyment of whacking a beach ball and wonder if she remembers any of those distant yesterdays. Either way, we are here in the present, together, and that is enough.

Margaret A. Elliott

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