

Dear Reader,

I was A-okay, doing all right. The brain tumor wasn't bothering me except for the occasional shooting pains, which, once I had established they weren't teeth which wanted out, didn't really bother me. Chances are the tumor wouldn't have bothered me much until I suddenly dropped dead.

But the doctor insisted. I planned everything very carefully. I would be in the hospital for a week at most. I would miss perhaps a month of work, and I would spend my time lying around the house and doing all those things never had time for. I printed out the guidelines to enter the Dear Reader Contest afterwards, in my spare time.

It didn't work out as planned. I was in the hospital for a month, counting rehabilitation. When I reached home, I just looked blankly at all I had intended to do. I hadn't had a stroke, but I was left with the same droop on my right side. I walked with a walker. Swallowing and talking were difficult; my handwriting unreadable. When I tried the computer, I made mistake after mistake. Bills had to be paid for me. I considered myself one step up from a vegetable.

Of course, in two years I've gotten better, to an extent. Slowly it dawned on me that there was a limit to how much better I would get. I had to give up working and got a "disabled" placard. I learned to walk, sort of, but have no balance. I have relearned the computer and knitting, and I can print reasonably well. I can do laundry (if someone carries it) and shopping (if someone drives). I can eat, but food doesn't interest me much. Nothing does, really, including writing which used to be very important to me. I have nothing but time and little I feel like doing.

Margaret Leary

Dear Reader,

Surprising, yet expected.

I am talking about true love. The kind of love you dream and image as a child. Sadly, some of us never receive the true love we deserve. I know because I was one of these people. But, I am here today to tell you that the passion of love can override any situation at any time. That is the miracle of love.

For me, it began twenty years ago when I met this special man. When in his presence, I found my smile, my heart, and my breath. Until one day, for reasons unbeknownst to me, the love we shared ended abruptly within six short months...or did it?

Life has a funny way of carrying you along with it. Time may play its game changing your life, but the one thing that will always remain the same is your heart. The feelings deep within the core of your being, right down into your soul. There is no one that can take that away from you. No one.

Twenty years after my experience with this special man and the love we had shared and lost, we have recently reconnected. Through life and time, marriages and children, we have once again found one another. I have not only found my smile, heart, and breath again, I have found my best friend, my soul

mate, my life. I have found myself in this man. I realized now that love is so much more than what I had settled for and accepted.

This love of this man has awakened my soul once again. His love is the gift of enjoying life, enjoying who I am, who I am meant to be. His love places me in a state that has my heart and soul soaring into unlimited imagination. I am ageless, timeless, and fearless.

I have learned from my experiences of love that one should never stop believing, never stop reaching, and never give up. Never settle or accept anything less than what you were made to have. Never stop dreaming. True love is being in a state of constant awe. This is what this man's love has done to me, for he is my true love. I love him with my heart and soul. I love him.

Kim Henninger

Dear Reader,

Although fall is my favorite season, with trees turned a shock of vibrant red, orange, and yellow in the crispened air, I will miss the summer more so this year than others.

Next Wednesday, my daughter goes back to high school. As a junior, she's taking another step towards graduation and independence. As much as I want her to move forward in life, there's a part of me that saddens at the prospect.

She learned to drive this summer, and will be taking her road test sometime in the next couple of months. She's a good driver by the dangers of the road the wheel of a car. I look at her and wonder where the years have gone that we should be here already.

I had planned to spend my summer getting caught up on my reading, but I kept telling myself that the books could wait important to do. That something was spending time with my only child, this daughter perched on the edge of adulthood.

As I'm typing this column at my dining room table, she's sitting next to me, finishing her school-required journal entry about a book she read. She's got a full schedule of classes, including a college level chemistry class, so I know her free time will be severely limited very soon. And we're one step closer to the end of summers spent together.

Childhood really is fleeting. I know I never believed that growing up, just like every other kid. We think there will always be time to play, to dream, to have fun with our families and I think that's as it should be. We have the rest of our adult lives to shoulder the responsibilities and burdens that come with the territory.

So, today, I'm reminded of the end of not only summer, but my daughter's youth as well. Regardless of the calendar, I'm not ready to give up the best parts of the last couple months. I'll reaffirm my

commitment to seize every opportunity to share special moments and carry forward some of summer's magic. Somehow, I think even my teenager will approve.

Nancy Luckhurst

Dear Reader,

Mail. I love mail. The kind of mail that I walk out doors to the little black box at my curb and retrieve.

Now I must admit I don't love bills and advertisements. They are a fact of life and are always there. But sometimes...yes sometimes there are pretty colored envelopes, hand written & addressed to me that I hasten to open!! I love cards or notes for all occasions, but the most exciting mail is that which was sent to me "just because". It is not my birthday, it is not a family death, it is not even a holiday!! It is simply the greeting of a friend or relative who took the time to write me, think of me, spend money on me (for the stamp and stationery) and take the time to walk to their little black box, put up the flag and send me a greeting.

Today, I went to a garage sale. The wonderful elderly lady there must be my kindred spirit. She had bundles of cards for all occasions ready for purchase at \$2.00 a bundle. I purchased the "birthday card" bundle and delighted in looking through all kinds of cards for all kinds of folks that I will use this year to remember special people. So, I will pause now, and go look at my cards for an upcoming birthday. Perhaps I will even go back to the garage sale and purchase another bundle...gee...maybe she has some "just because" stationery I can fill in my own thoughts with....real mail!!

Sorry...e-mail lovers!

Kris Bone

Dear Reader,

"No, ma'am. That's a 'y' not an 'e' and only one 'n'." If only I had a dime for every time I've had to spell my name. Well, you know what I mean. I love having a unique name, most of the time, but when I've had to spell it out three times in one conversation, or I get an email from someone I've known for years who has never been able to spell it correctly, even when replying to one of my emails which of course has been properly signed by me just three lines ago, it's frustrating that's all.

I admit, too, that when I was younger, I really wanted a 'normal' name. One that would allow me to buy a pre-made keychain or (because this was the '80s) a rainbow-colored notebook and pen set with 'Glynis' spelled out in bubble letters for all to see. But, alas, amid all the 'Kims' and 'Lynns' and 'Jennifers', no 'Glynis' could be found. Oh, why couldn't Mom and Dad have named me 'Elizabeth' or 'Donna' like everyone else?

Of course, now that I have matured a bit, and set about trying to forge my own path in this world, I find that having a name that many people haven't heard is a wonderful way to set myself apart. It can become a topic of conversation and an icebreaker at a dull party. And in a crowd, calling my name immediately gets my attention (although, so does 'Mom' but that's another story).

By this I, of course, mean no disrespect to all the 'Scotts', 'Johns' and 'Davids' reading this, but for all the people who sport distinctive, unique and possibly even odd monikers, we need to band together and unite! Proudly spell your name as many times as it takes! Repeat the pronunciation over and over until your blue in the face! It may not be cost-effective for us to print t-shirts for our group, but let's rejoice in the common thread of being just a bit uncommon!

Glynis Becker

Dear Reader,

Goodwill Saves Lives!

We pack up our best stuff, say good bye to our old house in Michigan. With emotions never before tested, we, meaning me, my husband and our old dogs, Maggie, plump white lab and Buster, our older golden retriever drive slowly to a new life in North Florida. We love it, playing with young grandkids, seems something new and interesting and exciting at every turn. Florida is, after all, the vacation destination! I am content collecting old shells and new memories, then it hits me like a Florida thunderstorm, quickly, out of nowhere, forceful and a little scary, I need to make a life! This will be simple, I'll just apply at the public library, I have worked in the library up north for all of my 40's and half of my 50's. This city has 21 branch libraries and a main library downtown that is a vast, architectural marvel, surely they have one tiny little spot for me.

Oh, what is that, a hiring freeze, on account of this economic downturn, recession? Try again later, how much later? I make a mental note to volunteer, remembering up north the enormous value of volunteers. But right now I need to make a little money. I need a little inspiration, ok maybe just a distraction. Feeling a little dejected, I poke in used book stores, cruise in and out of thrift shops, hoping for a revelation. Driving east to the beach, I see a familiar big blue G, think I will take a peek. Oh my, this place felt like an oasis, almost spiritual. I am in awe, books like brand new, sun dresses and rows of glassware my grandma would have marveled at. Linens, and games & dolls & stuffed animals, oh my. Just a little research and I learned the Goodwill of North Florida have been in the business of changing lives for over 60 years, creating jobs and giving local folks a fresh start. We have all needed a second chance or a helping hand in our lives. So I hatch what I think is a business plan as good as any Trump could imagine. I collect treasures from the Goodwill and rent a cozy spot at the most excellent antique mall in North Florida, slowly make a small profit. Tada! I am in business, all the while hoping I am helping my community. Feeling stronger now, I think I'll finish the forms for the library volunteer program. And just maybe the Goodwill helped me save my life! Donate!

Paula Thompson

Dear Reader,

For my 30th birthday my mom flew out to visit me. I had heard about all the great hiking in the mountains and I was itching to try it. My mom, bless her, has always been a sucker to my whims and agreed to go with me.

I heard it's pretty easy from some people at work. Plus I saw the trail from my gondola ride up the mountain a few weeks ago and there were kids doing it. If kids can do it so can we!

Arriving bright and early, full of confidence, we set out. Our only accompaniments, 2 small San Pellegrino's, a camera and extra sunscreen all crammed into a backpack. I know what you're thinking but I'm serious. That's what we brought.

My first clue that we had bitten off more than we could chew came very early. To be honest, I got a little winded by the time we finally walked across the lot to the start of the trail.

The first 4 passes across the mountain were STEEP! I would have given up then had this not been my brilliant idea. Somehow I managed to reassure my mom.

"Don't worry" ,I tell her, "it must get easier higher up. The mountain is just making sure we're warmed up first. I'll count each pass, it will be like a game."

Pass #16, is truly torturous. I mean, it should have been the last part of some massive quest or something. Now I'm starting to panic.. What if I never get my mother off of this freakin mountain? We stopped 6 times during that one pass and a few times the path narrowed where we could easily have fallen down the mountain.

"16!" I shouted at the end. "Well we know it can't possibly get harder than that!"

There ended up being 29 passes in all and turns out I was right...pass 16 was by far the worst. After that we felt unstoppable.

Looking back, if we had stopped to think what are we doing? We can't climb a mountain! We never would have made it. All we could think was let's just get through this pass....

We accomplished something amazing that day and surprised ourselves in the process. It was a magical birthday I'll never forget.

Erin Day

Dear Reader,

Do you ever stop and wonder why some creatures were created? I know they all have a purpose, even if I don't necessarily understand what that might be but sometimes you seriously have to wonder. For instance, crickets. We seem to have several in our house at the moment and they seem to know when the most annoying time to chirp (or whatever their noise is) would be. Okay, probably that isn't the case but at 5:30 in the morning when the house is quiet and everyone else is asleep and I am enjoying the silence the little buggers starts making their noise. Plus why does it always seem tens times louder then and like it comes in surround sound or something? If that one isn't enough we have one in the bathroom too. It hasn't jumped at me or anything but seems like the noise echoes or something and is even worse than the one in the living room, if that is even possible. I am sure that crickets do have a purpose and a reason for being but some days you have to serious wonder if they are truly necessary. Maybe I could just send mine somewhere else where they would be more appreciated. Doubt that will happen but a nice thought. For now, I'm off to the bathroom to see if I can find that annoying little bugger.

Rebecca Adams

Dear Reader,

On a Saturday in early July, I had plans to visit my cousin Lauren and her newborn son Jonah. Lauren called to say it wasn't a good day. She wasn't feeling well.

Two weeks before Lauren had an emergency C-section following a tough pregnancy. I asked what was wrong, and her response was she needs to go to the hospital. I told her I'd be right over to watch Jonah. No, her husband was going to do that. Lauren just needed a lift.

The feeling I had seeing her sitting on the steps outside her house waiting for me and attempting to shuffle to my car is still indescribable. I am thankful that I got to spend the next four hours with her.

As someone who is horrible in emergencies and not great with technology, I couldn't offer calmness, medical expertise or the ability to figure out how to change the darn channel on the television in her hospital room. What I could provide was what I'm known for jabbering. I was hoping if we kept chatting Lauren would not have a chance to worry about the blood that was drawn, the tests that were about to be run and the machines that were already hooked up to her. I forced her to show and describe every picture she had with her. I made her discuss in detail current events and analyze every cartoon show that we were stuck watching. Sometime after my insightful talking-vegetable conversation or my childhood Babar memories monologue, Lauren mentioned how she knew something wasn't right. She had a feeling that Jonah might have to be an only child. That's when my words got stuck in my throat.

Soon my twenty-nine year old cousin had to be put into a drug-induced comma, and she was right-no more pregnancies. We learned that she would have had a heart attack later that day if she hadn't gotten to the hospital. She spent more than two weeks there.

On a Saturday in late August, I had plans with Lauren and Jonah. We were going on a walk. Lauren was feeling better. I can't for the life of me remember what we jabbered about, but what a great day!

Amy Coppel

Dear Reader,

Driving home from work I get more and more edgy. As soon as I get inside the door off come the shoes. Ahhh!! Off come the pantyhose. Ahhh!! Even in our squeaky clean, shower everyday society, feet after a day in hose and heels just plain stink. Then I washed my feet Ahhh! What a calming effect. Mind you, I don't have a foot fetish, but

I am a foot person - a barefoot person.

I remember all summer long running barefoot. Shoes were for Sundays and church.

I remember standing up on our horse, Prince, and delighted in the soft hair sensation on my bare feet.

I remember climbing on the top of the lean-to of the barn and delighted in the variegated pressure of the shingles on my bare feet.

I remember sticking my foot into a fresh cow pie and kicking the whole mess at my brother. It wasn't all that gross - it was warm and looked like mashed sweet potatoes.

I remember my first pair of sandals. They had red, blue and yellow straps. I loved those shoes and lay on the bed to admire them.

I remember wearing hand-me-down shoes two sizes to big with socks stuffed in the toes.

I remember climbing Stone Mountain in Atlanta in sandals, my son said, "Just don't look back."

I remember when my sister got married; I was junior bridesmaid and wore black, strapped shoes three sizes larger after a barefoot summer. Mom was amazed at my growth. I remember my bones hurt with growing pains, now my bones hurt with age pains.

I remember my mom reclining barefoot in our backyard and as I looked at her feet, I thought, "So that's what 50 years old feet look like." Now I know what they look like and feel like.

Now years later - my feet are flat, my back is bad, my shoes are flat, but chic, and my toenails are painted hot pink.

Nina Lisenby

Dear Reader,

My supervisor just asked me to confirm my hourly pay rate. I thought I knew what it was but he came back to tell me I was wrong. Off by a penny. A penny! I felt like I had just been kicked in the kidney. Grey clouds, tears lurking in my eyes. Then I put it into perspective. One penny, that's forty cents a week, a little over twenty bucks a year. Okay, now the twenty dollars seems like a bigger deal but what bothered me more was my reaction. That's when I had the flash of insight that I've had before. You know the one we've had but then forgot we had it so we have it again? It's not what I do or how much I get paid that defines who I am, it is the life that I lead. The friends and family I have and the things I enjoy. The smiles I give to others and the smiles I find for myself that matters. A penny, funny how a little copper thing can bring such a profound feeling of wholeness in a brilliant moment. How often do we see those pennies lying on the street? I always stop to pick them up and my husband thinks I'm crazy but today, a penny brought me back to who I am and what's important in my life.

Faye Nelson-Ramsey

Dear Reader,

"Put down that book and go out and play!" Those words from my mother still resonate occasionally through my ears. While growing up in a small Midwest town in the 50's, books took me away to places I could only imagine. Most of my knowledge of history came from historical novels, so much more interesting than dry history classes taught by high school coaches who would rather have been on the field than in the classroom. Raising my own children, I tried to impart my love of reading, often thinking I had not succeeded. There have been glimmers over the last few years as their careers took off and they settled into relationships. Imagine my joy to learn that my son just ordered the complete Dr. Seuss to read to my soon to be born grandson! Technology now reports unborn children begin to recognize voices while in the womb. Maybe if I had just started earlier...

Linda Mittelstaedt

Dear Reader,

It is often the simple things that can make someone's day. At my place of work, we have been overwhelmed with a quantity of work that has gone far beyond anything we have seen before this year. It is not easy to put up with the extra stress that this work puts on to all of us workers. It is easy to say you want things to be better, but it takes some effort to actually help someone other than yourself have a better day. It is all worth it because while the receivers of the gift are pleased, the giver is doubly blessed for being able to aid those who need a little pick-me-up and receiving the thankfulness of those who are truly grateful.

I decided that I would do something to make everyone's day a little bit brighter by bringing in a dessert to share with everyone to add to the happiness quotient in everyone's life. I made Irish Potato Candy. No

potatoes are actually involved in the making of this food, which seemed to be a concern for some of my coworkers. Rather, it is little white balls covered in cinnamon that resemble miniature potatoes. The combination of butter, cream cheese, sugar, and coconut made delicious bite sized pieces.

I had many coworkers e-mail or come to me personally to thank me for bringing them in. I was also asked multiple times for the recipe. I felt that it truly was better to give than to receive, as it had brightened the day of many people, rather than just my own.

Melissa Fisher

Dear Reader,

"Wake up, only 20 minutes left to eat!"

4:08 am. During the last few weeks it has been a ritual waking up to these words of desperation. It is Ramadan--the month of fasting, where Muslims fast from dawn to dusk. This year the fasts are longer and more difficult than ever. Day by day, I realize the reasons I endure this yearly challenge.

4:12 am--Lasagna! I rest my sleepy head on my elbow and start eating, not caring that the pasta is only half warm or that it has suddenly become quite tasteless since last night's dinner. All I am thinking of is sleep and vaguely making sure my bites include bits of the food pyramid.

4:20. I have 8 minutes left. I drink a few glasses of water and start putting away the food and dishes as quietly as I can.

I am recalling a few nights ago--we decided to break our fast at a mouth-watering Thai restaurant. We gave ourselves twenty minutes to get there and order, so the food would be on our table precisely at 8:04pm--dusk.

As my husband and I sat down at the table, he immediately picked up the glass of water waiting for us. As he put it to his lips, I shook my head, "Don't drink it yet!"

He put it down with a frown. The ladies at the table next to me looked at me with disgust--I was too exhausted to explain that I wasn't an overbearing wife--we were just fasting!

7:58. The food came--early! We slowly put our food on our plates and stared at it.

8:01. The waiter came to ask us if everything was okay.

8:02. Tick tock!

We began with a prayer to thank God for the delicious food that we had in front of us and hoped that everyone around the world would eat a warm meal that night.

8:03. We picked up our waters.

8:04. Joy! We gulped it down.

8:05. Spring Rolls--One of the best feelings in the world is the moment you put the first morsel of food in your mouth.

24-7. With the minimal hardship it requires, the benefits are tremendous--fasting has made me build will power, break my bad habits and appreciate what I have.

Sabera Dewji

Dear Reader,

I have learned my lesson well. I will never, evah again ask a woman when she is due. I won't ask even if she's busting at the seams or even if she looks a little puffy. This is the story of my most embarrassing moment. I was shopping at a well-known fabric center and had a full cart. As I was standing in the long line, I was watching the woman behind the counter who was bagging the items. Behind the counter stood this 9-month pregnant looking woman holding and rubbing her lower back and groaning.

She was wearing a white, billowing blouse that covered her bump. I swear there was perspiration on her forehead. She looked miserable, like she was ready to pop. When I looked in her tired eyes, I asked her in my most perky voice, the fatal question of when she was due. She responded, "DUE??? I'M NOT DUE!!!!!!!" Oh, my, now what do I say? I mean I would never ask if I wasn't about 99% sure someone was pregnant. She then explained that ever since she had her son (hello, 12 years ago) her stomach poked out. She thought maybe she had a tumor or something. I grabbed my purchases and high-tailed it to the car. Now I was the one with perspiration on my forehead. Honestly, I was thinking that must have been a 25-lb. tumor. Never, evah again. Even if she's crowning.

Carol Green

Dear Reader,

I signed up for Dear Reader about 4 years ago, and I was hooked by the first message. I don't remember what it was, but it doesn't really matter. I was hooked. I've found many new "favorite authors" and fascinating books over the years.

In January of 2007, a few months after my 50th birthday, I returned to college, and I've had a wonderful time. Not only did I get the chance to take interesting classes and finally achieve that 4.0 average that eluded me thirty years ago, but I've met some great people who will hopefully be treasured friends and colleagues for the rest of my life.

I had one regret, though. In the 18 months since, I haven't been able to keep up with my email. All of the unread messages went into carefully-planned folders, though, and, this summer, I've finally begun to go through those folders. Most of the messages—the advertisements, the reminders of things that happened last year, and that sort of thing--were easy to skim and delete.

Guess what? I saved the best for last! Now that I've cleared out all of the unimportant things, I've got over 2200 messages from Dear Reader to go through. That's over 400 new books, perhaps 400 or more new authors to meet and over 500 of Suzanne's chatty messages to savor. All I have to do is sit back, sip my drink, and let Suzanne do the driving.

Doreen Farrar

Dear Reader,

On the first warm sunny day every spring he returns. I get home from work and he's waiting for me by the front door. It's Bob and he's back to guard the entrance to my house until the return of cold weather. He hovers in front of me not allowing passage until I say, "Hi Bob, it's just me." Quickly he moves away and I can continue on. Going back outside later he's still around, he hovers near but doesn't stop my progress. My daughter arrives home from school, my husband from work and he greets them, as well as any visitors we might have, as he first greeted me.

It's been nearly ten years since Bob made his first appearance. We were all wary of him at first. We tried to get him to leave, but persistently he stayed. After a while, when we realized that he meant us no harm, we named him Bob and just went about our lives. As I sit on my front porch writing on a beautiful sunny summer morning he passes by. He does that occasionally, even when I'm on the back patio. He'll just stop by, hovering at eye level as if to make sure I'm ok. I greet him with "Hi Bob!" and then he buzzes away up over the roof toward the other side of the house. He's black and yellow and about the size of the last joint of my thumb. According to the exterminator he's a carpenter bee. He had been eating holes in the wood trim under the eaves. In the evening when we were sitting on the porch enjoying the summer twilight we could hear him munching away, little piles of sawdust leaving evidence on the floorboards. In spite of having the bug man spray the holes, and eventually having vinyl siding put on the house, Bob is still around. I don't know where he lives now, but it must be close by.

Of course I realize that bees don't really live for that long. It is one of the mysteries of nature that there is always one carpenter bee that hovers at eye level around the front of my house. There he goes again:
buzzzzzzzzzzzzz....

Susan Donald

Dear Reader,

Sometimes it's good to have a witness. There are moments, more as I age, where I wonder if I've just seen what I thought I've seen, heard what I thought I've heard, and, yes, said what I thought I've said (for that one you need 2 witnesses--the person you said it to, and someone who can verify you did say it even if the person you were talking to didn't hear it). I admit there are times when I wish my life were being videotaped so I could go back and play the tape to verify that I am not losing my mind.

Last year my daughter started high school and requested a manicure and pedicure before the first day of school. My immediate response was "No. I'm almost 45 years old and I've never even had a pedicure!" And her reply was "Then come with me and get one."

This year I suggested the back-to-school manicure and pedicure for her, and pedicure for me. (Full disclosure: I had enjoyed my pedicure so much that I had gotten them on a semi-regular basis since) The first thing we had to do was pick our polish. I did not see the colors I had used in the past and wasn't super thrilled with the choices (don't like sparkly ones, can't be too bright, etc). Finally, I asked my daughter about a dark maroon color--she approved.

When the woman was putting the color on my nails I was pleased. Yes, it was dark, but it was a nice, rich color. Not bright. Not sparkly. My daughter wasn't as thrilled with the yellow she had picked out for her fingernails-it had a somewhat greenish tinge, but oh, well. We paid and headed out.

Stepping down into the parking lot I stopped dead. My daughter looked at me "What?" "Look at my toes." "Whoa. That's really weird." "Okay, so you agree that they were NOT this color inside?" "No, not at all! They were, like, a dark maroony color." "Right," I agreed, "NOT bright purple, right?" "Definitely not purple," she confirmed.

Sometimes it's good to have a witness.

Tammy Wachter

Dear Reader,

Maps! I love maps! Big ones, small ones, insets in articles and spread-'em-across-the-dashboard maps. All I have to do is pick a road to follow and see where it takes me.

I learned to read and love maps from my grandmother. When I was a kid we always took our summer vacations with my grandparents. Mom was the Driver, Grammie was the Navigator and I was the Navigator's Apprentice. In the early years, Grammie and I would share her map and she would point out where we were and where we wanted to go. Then she would trace a route with her finger that would get us there. Eventually we had two sets of maps, one for her and one for me. We would each find a route and compare notes to decide which was the best way to go. Together we mapped all over New York, New England, and Quebec.

Now my husband is the Driver and I am the Navigator. But instead of an apprentice, I have a competitor -Gertrude the G.P.S. Gertrude means well, but she just doesn't get it. Gertrude calculates a route

without regard to the wonders awaiting us around the next curve. On my map I can see all the potentially interesting stuff we would miss if we listened only to Gertrude. We talk about this, Gertrude and I. I'll suggest a turn that's different from Gertrude's plan and Gertrude comes right back with "TURN AROUND!" But if I am persistent, eventually Gertrude sighs and says "Recalculating..." and we off go.

It's been several years since my grandmother left this world, but every time I pull out my maps I think of her as my Navigating Angel. We've found beauty in Nebraska's Sand Hills, winding mountain roads in the Rockies and the Great Smoky Mountains, soaring mesas in New Mexico, and carefully pruned wine vineyards next to raucous and gnarled raisin vineyards in California.

Where will we go next? Let me check my map! I've got it right here.

Jane Darling

Dear Reader,

Old Age is not for the Young

Ever wonder what it's like to be old, you who are young? You really cannot know 'til you get there, and some get there sooner than others because of their pessimism to life. It has taken me awhile, but I am well on my way.

I look forward to each day and am thankful. Enjoy each day for what you find in it. Learn new lessons and apply the good ones to your life.

Life as a child is basically fun and care free, with lessons to be learned-some easy, some hard. The hard ones you'll remember; the easy ones may pass you by.

One of the best lessons is to take the lead of the elderly, hold on and listen. Most elderly have experienced it all, and most used that knowledge wisely and passed it on. Life is not meant to be all fun and games, but we can use it to our advantage.

Do not sit and worry about age. If you are pessimistic when you are young, you'll be a pessimistic, grumpy old person who never finds joy no matter what you do. Get up and help someone who is in need; there's satisfaction in doing it and joy follows with the doing.

Smile, even if you don't feel like it. Hug someone, show some kindness. Sit with the lonely and watch the sunset, listen to the songs of the birds or the patter of the rain.

Gifts do not have to be monetary. I love corny jokes, reminiscing with old friends, growing gardens, failing and learning where I went wrong-not always liking it, but loving it when it goes right. Accept your failures with your successes, that's a lesson too.

Try something you've never done before. You'd be surprised what you can do.

One day if you happen to have an off day, look up and put your hand in the hand of God!

Heidi Daum

Dear Reader,

Routine

What's that buzzing? My mind comes into focus, fuzzy and stale from 6 hours of battling dream goblins. There's probably symbolism in there somewhere but that continuous buzzing is keeping me from thinking. SHUT UP! I realize that I actually said it out loud when he starts to move beside me. Just hit the button, something inside me screams! Locate the sound, locate it. To the right of me. Ah Ha!! Found you! The red digital numbers angrily blink at my bleary eyes while I fumble for the correct off button. Why did I buy him this fancy alarm clock with a million different settings and buttons when he uses only one? He doesn't even use it now. Somehow, in the last 3 years, I got conned into being the oh merciful alarm keeper.

In the silence, I lie on my back and stare at the ceiling. This is my mental preparation for getting up and starting a routine that is so familiar, I could actually do it in my sleep. Sometimes, my mind is so preoccupied, it's like I am asleep. I need to get up. I need to make our lunches. I need to remember my cell phone today. I need to remember the mental list of things that need to get done. I glance at the now green numbers. It's past the time to get up. Here it goes.

Jaime Call

Dear Reader,

Some time ago I was invited to join a writing group. I didn't think I'd fit in because I hadn't really 'written' written before. Oh I'd written business letters, letters to friends in the old days when we used to do things like that, essays for examinations and the like. This group sits around an oval dining room table; we talk about books we've read or maybe a movie, but soon get to writing. We write for five minutes. Often it's eight. Then we read aloud our writings--even if they're yucky. We comment on phrasing. Words we like. A story line. There isn't any negative criticism. I like it; it's absorbing, provocative.

Poetry. Poetry! You are writing poetry. I am? You are! Words given to me, as in a gift, from a writing group of six. Five published authors, me in there for curiosity, for what the heck. A funny little thing happened inside my insides--a shy secret half smile. Am I writing poetry? My half sentences, innuendoes, reveries, a winking word. Playing with phrases, taking risks--I may be writing poetry!

So here goes...

My New Pal

Getting to know you

my new pal

peeling off the layers

thick and thin

transparent and secret

tasty and raw

crusty and soft

how far can we go

showing each other

our softness, our scars

Intimacy, sharing, caring

crying together

for one another

to one another

and at a desperate hour

a need for the other

Now--sometimes friends

sometimes foes

A change of heart

on my part

I like you,

I don't

I do, I don't

Ah but I do, I do

Mother's Boyfriend

At long last

fifty years of waiting

a phone call

Tommy Wilson

Of course, of course!

Still pretty

Still blushing

lunch served in his quarters

La de dah, la de dah

a laugh

a wee accident

a wet soiled dress

He called again

then once in awhile

she liked that

But I loved my Dad

Linda Bailey

Dear Reader,

I did not keep a daily journal and now, at age 80, I wish I had. I see that it would have been a good thing to leave for my children so that they could know the things that were in my heart. I know this because my Mother kept a diary. She left several, and we girls have them and it is a comfort to me to read the one I have. However, Mom did not write about her feelings or thoughts concerning the things happening in her

life, just the events of the day. The times we were sick with mumps, and the measles, the arm that was broken in a fall down the stairsteps - things that happen to kids. The trips my Dad made with his truck to take cattle to market for a customer then staying overnight in the stockyards so he could bring a load of coal from the mine to another customer. She wrote about our neighbor boys being drafted into the armed forces during World War 2, and she told about the sale of our family farm.

I wonder what her thoughts were as she mourned the death of her Mother at a time Mom was just starting her own family.

Of course I do know how she felt about a lot of things, because she was not slow in letting us know how we should behave and what chores we were expected to do. (Being the first child, I have to admit I became a bit tired of hearing some of the things that must be repeated over and over in bringing up 7 more children.)

I wish I could read how my Grandmothers thought about things in their lifetimes. I know a little about the things they went through, but there is no record at all about their feelings.

Yes, I regret not having a journal for my family, but I resolve to do some writing so they will know about some of the things that happened in my life, both before and after my marriage to their Father, and, as much as I can tell them about their grandparents, and other ancestors.

Winona Anderson

Dear Reader,

Growing up in Hershey, Pennsylvania, where the aroma of chocolate permeated the air, you would think one's passion would be candy. This was not the case for my siblings and me. Our summer passion was - corn! To the Indians, maize was a staple of life. To us, corn was an amazing crop, not only for eating, but for providing endless hours of summer joy.

Our childhood home was located in a rural setting completely surrounded by acres of corn fields. For the farmer, the fields meant a bounty for his animals. For our mom, the fields were a handy garden where she could occasionally snatch a few ears to make her Pennsylvania Dutch dish, chicken-corn soup. For the youth of the neighborhood, those fields became our enormous playground where fun knew no bounds.

Once the corn grew taller than ourselves, it was time for serious exploration. Sometimes we were Daniel Boone blazing trails like pioneers going through the Cumberland Gap. We used the corn stalks to build forts. Preparation was essential! Indians might be skulking behind the husks. Arrows could be flying through the ears! Other days we were Dr. Livingston plunging through the African jungles on a dangerous safari. We were in hot pursuit of, not lions or elephants, but field mice! We might even spy a groundhog. We never knew what might be lurking among the stalks.

Ultimately, the highlight of the summer arrived – the corn roast! This event was as much anticipated as Santa's arrival on Christmas Eve. Our neighbor grew rows of irresistibly sweet, yellow corn. He cooked

the ears atop his stone fireplace, and covered them with wet burlap. Eating those luscious, steamed ears was not just about savoring each butter-soaked kernel, but it became a contest. Who could eat the most ears? It was not unusual to hear boasting about eating ten ears, but who was counting? If we had a good ear of corn and a glass of orangeade, we were in heaven.

Alas, summer ended, and the fields turned brown. We returned to school with full bellies and heads filled with corny stories to share. The farmer probably was not too happy with our field excursions, but we were contented children eagerly awaiting another summer and its cornucopia of adventures and delights.

Connie Blocher

Dear Reader,

Most of us probably know what dowsing for water is. However, for anyone unfamiliar with the concept, dowsing is an age-old method of finding where a well should be drilled, without employing a geological engineer. (Those of my generation might have first seen dowsing portrayed comically on television's *The Beverly Hillbillies* or *The Real McCoys*.)

Only certain people are said to have the gift. Dowsers are normally thought of walking across an open area holding the short ends of a two or three foot long "Y"-shaped stick, called a divining rod. When the rod begins to vibrate or point to the ground, the dowser proclaims, "Dig here!!!"

Foolishness?

I'm here to tell you dowsing works.

A number of (too many) years ago, while working on one of my first pieces for my college newspaper, I was assigned a story on a new book on folklore one of the history department's emeritus faculty, Dr. Walker Wyman, had recently completed. The topic of one chapter was dowsing. Dr. Wyman was a very affable, older gentleman and likely recognized my nervousness.

After a few initial questions, he suggested we test the dowsing theory. In the hallway outside of his office, he handed me a rod and we set out down the hall. On one side of the hallway I could feel a definite pull, which grew stronger as I approached the drinking fountain. Over the fountain the rod wanted to stop.

I later learned from another faculty member that entertainment at social gatherings held at Dr. Wyman's house often included tracing the water pipes buried in his backyard with divining rods. (Apparently the gift is not given so very sparingly.)

Twenty years later, when a relative of mine needed a new well drilled for his vacation property in northern Wisconsin, he twice consulted a geological engineer. Both of these rather expensive holes were dry, producing no water. The third hole was drilled in the spot recommended by a local dowser. Water was found within 10 feet of the depth estimated.

There are things science cannot explain. For me, dowsing is one of them. Imagine the possibilities if dowsing could be used to find our best life partners.

Karl Gandt

Dear Reader,

It's all a question of time:

Interruptions of "Why, How, When" consistently seem to ring out whenever I have just answered a phone call, walked into the bathroom, tried to finish a scrapbook page, cook dinner or anything that remotely resembles "Me time". Some of the standard Mom answer are Why Just because, How--look it up, you have a dictionary/computer/father for that, When--When I am finished doing whatever you are interrupting which will be sooner if you would just stop with all the questions. One of two things will then happen, tears will start to well up in those little faces or I will stop and answer with all my attention if I can. Later, when I am alone, I will remember when my Grandmother took the time to answer all my questions as a child, just as I hope I do with mine more often than not. My Grandmother has been gone for a year now and I wish she was still here to ask questions of and watch her great-grandchildren grow. Soon these little voices around me will change, they won't want to be seen with Mom in public, and friends' answers will become more important than mine. When those quiet days come, I will be wishing I could hear more "Why, How and When" along with little arms wrapped around my legs and kisses that say "Thanks" for paying attention. Our time is one of the best gifts we can give our children, cherish the interruptions, they could turn into one of the best conversations and memories you may ever have.

Kelly Holt

Dear Reader,

There's a beauty to walking until your legs hurt and until you're feeling so tired that you have to sit down and take a long drink of water. There's a special feeling in knowing that when you go to the summer fair, you walked from one end of the grounds to the other and you go home sore, waiting to crawl into the bath with a wonderful book to unwind and let the muscles start to loosen up.

But when you're in a wheelchair, you lose that ability. It's not that you don't feel tired; on the contrary, you do. But it's because you're ill and likely already exhausted yourself doing the one or two things that you can do without stopping for long periods. If you do feel tired, it may also be because you can't shake the thought that you're a burden to your caregiver—always being pushed around in the wheelchair, always being supported when you get up, always being taken to out-of- the-way disability washrooms when in public.

See, I can no longer use my feet the way God intended. And it hurts. The physical pain of what limits my mobility is nothing compared to what I feel internally. I long for the times when I could take long walks on beautiful summer evenings or when I could chase my little cousin around and make her shriek with delight.

Those times are lost when you can no longer carry yourself on your own two feet, with your own strength. But I can tell you from personal experience, there are things that you cherish so deeply in your heart that words are inadequate. Watching a sunset outdoors in a cozy spot with my mother is breathtaking. Seeing my little cousin run to me and jump into my lap makes me laugh, but cry with joy at the same time. Watching all the things that are at waist-level at the fair that I would otherwise likely miss is fun.

I may not be able to walk the distance of the fairgrounds anymore, or take long walks, or chase my two-year-old cousin around, but I still have my heart, my spirit, and a family who I adore as much as they love me.

For that, I can't thank God enough.

Katherine Gere

Dear Reader,

A few months ago, I was talking with a friend and, as usually happens when two or more parents are gathered in one location, the discussion quickly turned to our children. My friend described one Saturday morning with his four-year-old son. The little boy had just polished off his favorite breakfast of oatmeal and cinnamon applesauce. Beaming with delight, the child reached for the grand finale: a cup of chocolate milk. However, his exuberance was more than the kitchen table could contain and the cup toppled over, sending a white wave coursing over the edge and onto the floor.

"Dad! I did NOT see that coming!" the child exclaimed in a most mature tone. To his father's surprise, no tears fell from his eyes, nor any pout showed on his lips. He only wore a wide-eyed grin as he grabbed a fistful of napkins and sat down on the floor to begin the clean-up.

"No, son, you usually don't," was his father's deadpan response.

Recently, my husband came home with the news that, after almost fifteen years with the same company, he was being laid off. You could definitely say that I did NOT see that coming any more than my friend's son anticipated tipping over his breakfast drink. Unlike the child, however, I did not spring into action. I was angry at the company's decision to let a long-term employee go. I was scared for the future in this dismal economic climate. I was paralyzed with the fear of the unknown.

After feeling sorry for myself for a few days, the enormity of the little boy's response to the spilled-milk incident came rushing back to me. This child quickly accepted the loss of his morning treat and got on with the business of mopping up the mess. There was no wailing about the missing milk. There was no

wondering if he could get more. There was only a brief comment on the unexpected nature of it all and then a leap into action to address the situation at hand. At four years old, the kid had it right! We may not see unfortunate events on the horizon and we may cry and pout about what is gone. Or we can pick up our own fistful of napkins and dive in.

Robyn Hollister

Dear Reader,

The day had finally arrived. The day I was going to kill my best friend, at least that was how my heart saw it. I met my best friend sixteen years earlier, nestled among his five brothers and sisters. At three weeks old, he didn't even fill up the palm of my hand. My heart knew immediately that he was special. Four weeks later my best friend came to live in my home and my heart for the next sixteen years.

Through the years he slept with me, sat with me in my favorite chair to watch TV. He listened to all my problems, jumped with joy when I was happy, and gently licked my tears away as I cried. His eyes always shone with love and an uncanny understanding of all situations.

Sadly, after sixteen human years or one hundred twelve dog years, those eyes were becoming dimmed by cataracts, the ears didn't hear well any more, and the hips too stiff to move some days. I became his eyes, showed him with touches what to do when he couldn't hear, and carried him when the hips couldn't. Then one day we faced a new hurdle we couldn't overcome. My best friend had cancer and his organs were shutting down. In all those years he and I had traveled to the Vet's office many times, but only one remained.

Somehow, I believe he knew what was going to happen that day, but I saw no censure in those wonderful, filmy eyes. I held him in my arms, whispering love into his ears, holding back the tears that would have upset him, as he quickly, peacefully slipped away, no longer in pain.

Today, a year later he lies in the back yard with a small stone to mark the spot. I visit to tell him about my ups and downs. I talk and he still listens. As the tears come, as they invariably do, I can almost feel a soft lick on my cheek as a tear hovers before hitting the ground.

Pearl Champ

Dear Reader,

"Art or Something Like It"

One Saturday, my parents, sister, and I went to the Taubman Museum of Art. The art museum first opened in November of last year, and I had been waiting for months to find the time to go and drag along

my parents and sister. After perusing several exhibits, we all took pause though at this massive ball of wax or it was how it appeared at first. I glanced over to the name plate "Atlanta Gal."

"It looks like a beehive," my dad stated.

"Yeah, it does," I agreed. I tilted my head to the side. "It also looks like a chandelier." I had noticed the candles around the top of the piece. The wax obviously came from those candles.

"So what do you think of it? It's made from steel and wax. What image conjures up when you think of the Atlanta gal?" a volunteer spoke up behind us.

For a moment, we were all silent and lost in our thoughts. "Scarlet O'Hara," I answered timidly.

"Exactly. It has the strength of steel at its core, but it has wax over top. It is a lot like a Southern woman," the volunteer elaborated before moving on to answer other people's questions.

As my family moved on, I paused and thought about what she said. The core was unchanging and unbreakable, yet the outside was fragile. In heat, it would melt further and change. In cold, the wax could break off. Rivers of wax had elegantly drizzled down the steel, and after a bit, it reminded me of the ball dresses of the old South. The "Atlanta Gal" was quite lovely and very intricate. A woman of steel and grace. She can fall apart with emotions, but her core, her inner being, would not break. She was a steel magnolia. I gave her one last look before continuing through the exhibit, but I still cannot get her out of my mind.

Something as simple yet strange as a piece of artwork that was a combination of steel and wax could produce such emotions and meanings. It made me realize that it is good to find the beauty in all things, and we should all take a little time to pause at the meaning of art. We just might really enjoy what we find.

Cherie Reich

Dear Reader,

I confess - I am addicted to reading. This affliction has evolved through the years. As a kid I always heard "did you turn your light off" from my mother. "Yes, I did" ...but my flashlight was on under the covers so I could finish the chapter. My first summer job in eighth grade was at the library. I worked all summer and only made \$27.50 but I was able to read all the new books that year. What a treat!

My reading for pleasure declined while I was in college - there were just too many hard books to read every week for class assignments. However, once I was employed and out on my own, I resumed my reading frenzy. A small local library was nearby and I vowed to read all their books. I think I got through the "C's" before I moved.

When I met my husband to be and found out he kept his own list of books I knew it was a match. Now I needed to read the books from his list as well as mine! He suffered from Lou Gehrig's disease and when he lost his ability to turn pages, he listened to books on tape - I got caught up in those books too. He died in 2004, but I'm still working off 'our' book list - my excel spreadsheet is up to 505 books.

I keep a book by the bed, and a couple in the car at all times (for doctor appointments and to help pass the time on the treadmill). Books are the first items I pack for travel and I keep my master list in the car in case I swing by the library. I'm always open to recommendations from friends and of course Dear Reader selections assure that I won't run out of books to read anytime soon. I really can't keep up - but I love trying!!

Pat Fraher

Dear Reader,

"I'm flexible." My dad would say it all the time. It was his trademark. It meant don't make a fuss on my account. "Do you want stroganoff or pork chops for dinner?" my mom would ask. "I'm flexible," my dad would reply, sometimes throwing in "Just open a can."

Now, three years after his death at age 92, I hear him in my head when someone offers me choices. I can't say it, of course. "I'm flexible" was his. I say "I'm easy" instead. "That's my line," my wife will reply. "You said that's why you married me." Banter is a lifestyle choice in our house.

My dad would never say goodbye, he'd say "Save your money," with a wave from the porch. As a child of the Depression, that was his trademark of trademarks. Opening a can and being flexible came third to this expression. He and my mom traveled extensively and enjoyed their lives, but he certainly saved his money. He was one of those unflashy "millionaires next door" you read about. Nobody knew, of course, by the way he dressed and lived.

One way my dad saved money was by being a do-it-yourselfer, and I was his assistant. He owned apartments, and taught me how to paint, fix plumbing, replace floor tiles. We moved a lot of appliances around too. One lesson he taught me most emphatically, without words-when moving a refrigerator through a doorway that is narrower than the refrigerator, it is never a question of measurements. It is a question of faith.

Life lessons sometimes come from the most mundane of sources.

It's true what they say, that you are not really gone as long as there are people alive who remember you. Sometimes, on unusually beautiful, crisp autumn evenings, when there's a trace of wood smoke in the air, I silently speak to my dad. You would have loved this night, dad, I say. Maybe are loving this, somehow. Sometimes when the breeze rustles the leaves at my feet, I imagine I can hear him too, a smile in his voice-"Save your money." I do, dad. But, I add, I was never much for opening a can. I'm taking Jen and the kids out tonight. Where? I don't know. But I'm easy.

George Waters

Dear Reader,

SOMETHING STILL MISSING

When I was a little girl about four years old I would go to the county fair and stand on the steps of the new semi tractors. I would beam ear to ear smiling as the wind would lightly blow my long blonde locks around my face. I'd turn to my grandma as I would sit in the big ole seat and say, "Isn't it beautiful grandma?" "I am going to drive one someday." Of course, the loving woman that my grandmother is agreed and smiled back.

After graduating high school I landed a state job in an office, the last place I wanted to be. I finally had the opportunity to drive the big trucks in my early twenties, but shortly after that my husband and I also started a family. While the kids were little I drove locally and was home everyday. I came home and fulfilled my duties as a mom, wife, nurse, cook and maid. I had the best of both worlds at my fingertips. For some reason guilt was beating me down, completely heartbroken I stopped driving.

I discontinued trucking for years to raise the kids up to teenagers. I was greatly happy as a mother, but something was still missing. I couldn't travel down the interstate without weeping when I passed a truck or heard the roar of a diesel engine. My husband and children recognized that I profoundly desired to go back doing something I enjoyed.

I was torn at what to do. But, I identified that there were hundreds of thousands of mothers working doing what they deeply enjoyed, so why couldn't I?

My family has been my biggest supporters, they encouraged me to go back. So that I did, and once again I have the best of both worlds. It is still challenging and will continue to age me quicker than some occupations would. At least every wrinkle I acquire I get it from being the happiest mother and truck driver in the world. As I peer through the large window driving down the interstate I am contented in my career, satisfied helping support my family and moving freight across America. For everything you handle comes by truck at some point. Happy Trails.

Candy S. Riley

Dear Reader,

"Thoughts as I Pack"

Three piles of clothes are stacked on the guest bed. The cruise brochure says pack 3 types of clothing -casual shipboard attire or day wear, comfortable apparel for sightseeing and evening wear. I do have 3 stacks of clothes - evening, warm temperatures and cool temperatures. I'm torn between having a closet to unpack into versus travelling light. We were taught as youngsters to travel as light as possible. Growing up, there were 9 of us travelling in a station wagon. My mother became quite a pro at packing jeans were placed in a paper grocery bag to be packed between the camping equipment rather than taking

precious space in the 2 suitcases allotted to her and 7 children. Sweatshirts and jackets were in a separate sack also - maybe even pajamas. Father's rule was - one change of clothes, - but Mother managed to pack more. I suspect she didn't want to spend time at Laundromats while on vacation.

I walk around the bed every night, removing an article or two of clothing. Will my dad win or will the ability to wear some fun cruise outfits win? I still have 2 days before I close and lock the suitcase for good.

Should I pack those silk blue and white pants? They'd be fun to wear after a day of site seeing. They fit the suggested "relaxed elegance" style. Hmm – they don't go with anything else I have laid out. They just moved back into my closet.

After a week I have narrowed the stacks to what seems to be a good combination for 2 weeks of travelling. My biggest dilemma seems to be socks. Due to foot problems, I wear tie shoes. Wearing sandals would be so much easier - no socks required. How many pairs do I bring? What colors? How quickly will the socks dry if I wash them in the sink?

This morning I actually put the clothes in the 2 suitcases. There is still plenty of space. I throw in more socks. And a book to read at the ship's Laundromat. I've reached a happy compromise.

Sarah Ferneding

Dear Reader,

In the year before the death of my mother, I learned how to man-handle a Troy-Built Pony, that a 66 year-old daughter can not physically compete with a 90 year-old mother and that a garden with lots of hard work provides good bonding time. My mother for many years planted, weeded and harvested a garden plot which must have been nearly half an acre in size. (Comment of daughter after she also worked that garden plot.) Mother learned from her parents the value of growing your own food. That lesson was reinforced as she provided for her family through the depression. Her garden contained potatoes planted above ground in straw for ease of harvest and corn, which she outwitted deer and groundhogs to harvest and freeze. She grew Roma, Beefsteak, Bib Boy and Cherry tomatoes and there were always enough to share with church members. Her peppers for ketchup included bell, cayenne and banana.

That last year we planted marigolds and zinnias in bean rows because that would keep some particular "bug" from eating the plants. I was responsible for putting the seeds in the row and I just aimed them and didn't always get just one seed per spot. I have to tell you that her rows of flowers were so colorful and showy that we didn't even care if the bugs got the vegetables.

The weeds had to be fought weekly and that is when I learned to follow the Pony and try to keep it going down the middle of the rows while mother wielded the hoe expertly down the rows. I could only hold out for half an hour then it was time to rest in the shade of huge old maple trees, enjoy the breeze, drink our water while we talked of everything.

We planned the garden, worked the soil, planted and harvested together. It was the most wonderful summer and the hardest physically and also emotionally as I knew it was probably our last garden. I play

the memory often and when I look at the flowers, I remember how disgusted and yet how pleased mother was that there were more flowers than vegetables in those rows.

Mary A. Gary

Dear Reader,

The love of my life taught me to embrace my birthday. At first it felt too bold and just wrong. Then after tossing his idea around, it grew on me. I started scheduling that special-day off from my norm. Each year I anticipated October 16th with childlike butterflies in my stomach until October 16th, 2004. I never took heed what turning 60 meant until that morning at six a.m. when my darling older sister phoned me to sing Happy Birthday. Then giggling she said, "Joani, these are your Golden Years, enjoy them!" My stomach felt like cement. Her comment hit me with a vengeance and confusion. What does she mean? I couldn't, just couldn't be in my Golden Years. Is my life over?

It was time to make changes, but I sooo wasn't ready. Instead, I slumped down into my couch far too long, nearly three years; however, my life as I knew it was changing around me. I lost my husband to a heart attack, and my two married children are quite busy raising their families, albeit I treasure my visits. Unexpectedly, I was offered a job for more pay and less stress. So without much ado, I promptly gave work my notice, packed up, and moved to a small unfamiliar town within two weeks, living ten minutes from work. How grand is that! At night I would promptly come home to that ole familiar couch – for two more years. Nothing seemed to have changed.

When my back began to ache from sleeping on the couch for two more years, I returned to a yoga routine. Then I realized I stopped my meditation practice as well. It used to ground me and calm my inner thoughts. How did the life of a yogi disappear? I disappeared. A colleague mentioned a health food store I might like to try, so last week I visited it. I discovered a lovely store, which is a co-op as well, and immediately signed on to volunteer a couple hours per week.

Next month when I turn 65, I plan to embrace that day once again. It is my turn to give back to the universe all that I have received. I am beginning to love that idea already.

Joan Raubar

Dear Reader,

Back to School. You either love it or dread it.

Getting ready to go back to school was an exciting time for my sister and I. First, Mom would take us shopping to pick out our "first day" outfit and the outfit we planned to wear for the annual school pictures. Then we needed to find new shoes and snow boots to get us through the coming winter months. We finished up with a stop at the dime store to buy the miscellaneous supplies and pick out our "school boxes" to store our supplies in.

Flash forward to present day. I'm a 40-something mother of two. Do I still look forward to back to school? Yes and no. I still enjoy back to school shopping with my kids. I do not look forward to overseeing homework or more strictly enforcing the bed time rule. Not to mention the "getting ready in the morning" routine. On the other hand, I welcome the new structure and routine that will envelop our lives once school is back in session.

My oldest child (my daughter) is a freshman at the high school this year. This is an exciting time for her! A new school and new, more challenging classes; chemistry, algebra, global world history. We both attended the open house hosted by this year's senior class where we paid all our school fees and got Katie's schedule. We had a lot of fun wandering around the school, planning out the best routes to take from class to class. There were squeals of excitement when friends, separated during the summer months, found each other in the hall. I began to realize how exciting this is for the students as well. Sure, they give up sleeping in and now there is homework to be completed but finally, a chance to interact with their peers (or peeps or posse or whatever they're calling themselves this week).

As I drop my daughter off on that first day of school, a tear hangs at the edge of my eye. My baby is growing up! She's becoming an independent young lady. I'm so proud of her - just beginning her journey into adulthood.

I want to go back to school to and start all over again.

Jennifer Ruwe

Dear Reader:

One great memory from this past summer for me is taking a vacation with my son (age 6). On our trip, we made it two Major League Baseball games. Our team of choice lost the first game we saw; but as we were preparing to leave the ballpark, someone came up to my son with a ball. "The ball boy gave me this game ball," he said, "would you like to have it?" My son was overjoyed. The gift of this ball made his day! Never mind that the home team had lost the game, or that he was very tired from having traveled all day; having the ball was the coolest thing that he could imagine. He played with it all the way to where we were staying, and slept with it at night (until I pried it from his hands once he was asleep).

When we arrived home a few days later, my son was excited to show the ball to his sister; and as they were playing in the yard, they managed to lose it almost immediately in one of the bushes. I located it after much searching, but I ordered my son not to play with such a special keepsake. After all, it was his first MLB game, and he didn't understand that most people NEVER get a game ball! So, we put the ball it on a high shelf so we could look at it, but not lose it.

Now I've been thinking about that. Was I right to hurry and put the ball away? Would my son have enjoyed it more if he had the opportunity to play with it whenever he wanted and to think about the game we went to every time he hit it? Or do we get more enjoyment out of the ball safely on the shelf? Ah, one of the great mysteries of life...

Amanda Hecht

Dear Reader,

My 4-year old daughter loves Pooh Bear, so when she saw a Pooh that she just had to have, I had a "ah-ha" moment of teaching her responsibility. We agreed to her picking up all her toys before bedtime for 14 days before she could have the Pooh in her possession. I would buy it right then. I watched her in the rearview mirror; I could tell the wheels were turning in her head as I saw her eyes focus inwards and her lips scrunch up in deep thought on the drive home. I saw the light bulb moment when the dimple appeared on her cheek signifying she thinks she has an answer. When we got home, she attempted negotiation, "Mama, I promise I will pick up my toys for the 14 days if I can just have my new Pooh now." The thoughts of being proud of her for attempting negotiation, the way her mind works attempting a new angle, and what could lay in store for me and her father in her teenage years if I didn't hold firm all flitted quickly through my mind. I explained to her, "Lizziebit, I have to work for 14 days before I get paid, and thus you can work for 14 days before you get Pooh." I could see the gears again turning in her head, "Okay, Mama." She then attempted to negotiate with her father at bedtime just to be able to cuddle the new Pooh, and he held firm as well. I put a sheet of paper on the refrigerator with 14 boxes drawn on it and every night we crossed off a box after the toys were picked up. The smile of delight was worth it the wait when she had reached box number 14 and she got to hold her new Pooh. I can but hope that I taught her that working for something makes it worth the wait in a society where "buy it now, worry later" has been the mantra for two generations. My new challenge is to remind her how nice it is to be able to find her toys in the toy box when she is looking for them instead of having them scattered all over the house without having a tangible reward.

Kathryn Benson

Dear Reader,

Bad things happen. Good things happen.

I believe that it's not what happens to us in life that defines us but how we deal with those events that is important.

The most amazing person I've ever known was my son Brian. At 17, Brian was diagnosed with leukemia. I could tell you stories of how a 17 year old coped with such a disease. I could list time after time when he stuck it out, overcame and moved on. I could tell you of agonizing times, too, but those I don't dwell on.

The one I'm going to share I call "Never Give Up".

The diagnosis was unexpected and devastating. We were like deer in a head light; dazed. We stumbled through the first days of hospital admission, bone marrow biopsy, and surgery. Brian was shell-shocked and filled with fear. He asked "Why me?" "What did I do to deserve this?"

I wanted to help him deal emotionally with this but how could I when I was having my own difficulty?

That very first week, however, Brian showed us the kind of person he was. One afternoon, he asked his father & me not to come to the hospital the next morning. He wanted time by himself, he said, without parents hovering over him. We reluctantly agreed.

When we arrived at the hospital that afternoon, a different Brian greeted us. A smiling and confident young man replaced the fearful boy. He had decided to fight.

Inspired by the story of Jim Valvano's struggle with cancer, Brian began writing "Don't give up, don't ever give up" on everything he could find; scraps of paper, envelopes, cards, even styrofoam cups.

On one of his times at home, he said to me "Mom, I don't think I'm going to die, but if I do, I want my headstone to say "Don't give up". "Why?" I asked. "Well", he said, "If people see it & see that I was young, maybe they'll get courage from it".

Just a week before his 20th birthday, Brian died from complications of his bone marrow transplant. His headstone reads "DON'T GIVE UP, DON'T EVER GIVE UP". My husband and I have lived that motto ever since. We haven't given up on life because Brian never gave up on it.

Carol Welch

Dear Reader,

There I was, taking my very first college English course and I was a little nervous. My angst had nothing to do with the subject matter of the class as English was a favorite of mine in high school, much to the dismay of most of my friends. No, I was nervous because I was one of the older "kids" in the class and I was afraid of making a complete and utter fool of myself in front of the other students, most of whom were young enough to have been my own children.

The teacher, like most, was a storyteller and at one point she enlightened the class that she was a reformed smoker and that it had been five years since she'd kicked the habit. She also told us she'd been having continuous thoughts of "lighting up" again.

About half way through the course, we were required to write a paper, the specific requirements of which escape me now. However, I do recall the title and the topic of the paper and in addition to my own habit, my teacher's confession helped lead me there. I made the title of my paper "Coffin Nail" and the subject had to do with the stages of quitting smoking and how to go about accomplishing the task. I wrote in my paper that I intended to quit smoking in honor of my mother on her birthday.

When the day came to learn our grades, my teacher asked me if I planned to do what I'd written and I said yes. It was only a few weeks after that when I smoked my last cigarette on my mother's birthday. Not only did I get an "A" on my paper but I believe that writing it played a big part in my quest to become a non-smoker. Now, when my mother's birthday rolls around, it's only a candle I light, but there's one more thing to celebrate.

Dorine C. DeLutri

Dear Reader,

I never considered how congregational libraries change lives, until I got demoted (My request.) from chairman of the Work Area On Education to congregational librarian.

What was God thinking? After five years I no longer chose to bang my head against the brick wall of leadership recruitment, but congregational librarian. Come on!

When my replacement asked me to serve as librarian, I spent the entire Sunday School hour, in the car, bawling, ranting and raving at God, for granting my request. Why hadn't I been more specific? All I knew about libraries was the secret of how to find my favorite science fiction books. Also that public libraries were not the place to supplement your Sunday School lesson plans!

I suppose it was the bullheaded German in me that would not let me admit, this was not what I planned. But, never in my wildest dreams had it occurred to me that in thirty plus years, I would have left a trail of book reviews, newspaper and magazine articles, eleven years of writing the Latchstring Column for the Church Synagogue Library Association's national news letter, as well as, hob knobbing with editors of same. (Heaven for a "wannabe" writer.)

Perhaps even better than that, was the realization that I had seen marriages saved. Togetherness promoted as, he fished and she read Christian romance novels. Preschoolers and mentally retarded adults learning "God loves me." as they discovered the connection between words and pictures. Working with homeschoolers, and saving library patrons countless dollars, when it was needed the most. All because it was not necessary to buy media.

Because of the internet, I have encouraged those who felt the need to establish or reconstruct a congregational library. Off and on we have provided books for a Russian school teacher. Eventually being able to share Christianity with these students. Currently we are preparing a shipment of media to a Christian lending library in Southern Africa. This material will be lent to lay leaders who for various reasons cannot attend school for this purpose.

Now I think perhaps I have an inkling of what God was thinking. Now I know many ways libraries can change lives. But most of all I am no longer raging at God, when he proposes a change in my congregational library ministry.

Lois M. Cone

Dear Reader,

So many parents of teenagers bemoan the fact that their sons and daughters never do anything around the house, or appreciate all the things that are given to them. New iPods every year, \$400 cell phones, expensive digital cameras, designer this and designer that. Sometimes it seems that teenagers' appetite for all things materialistic is insatiable. But who is to blame for overindulgence and its consequence, ingratitude?

I've noticed that the more spoiled the teen, the more likely it is that the parents fail to insist they perform the most basic of household tasks. Making a bed, vacuuming a rug, preparing a meal, mowing a lawn, emptying a dishwasher - these are chores that were standard when I was growing up, and at 47, I am hardly ancient. And yes, I moaned and groaned and thought it was awful at the time. But I never thought I had the option to refuse.

There are plenty of teens who boast they have never touched a vacuum in their life. They can spend hours playing the most complicated video game, but wouldn't have a clue as to how to clean a bathroom. These are the same teens given a car when they turn sixteen (though they don't have jobs), expect Mom or Dad to pay all their expenses, and for some misguided reason, are exempt from any responsibility.

What is wrong with insisting that along with the privileges of young adulthood, come responsibilities? Do we want to raise a generation of kids whose only adversity has been a limitation on their monthly cell phone minutes? Is it really helpful to them, and to the rest of society, to grant them their every wish and desire and expect nothing from them in return? What will it be like for them when they're out in the real world someday, and their bosses and their spouses demand accountability?

Sure, we parents want the best for our kids. But more often than we would like to think, what's truly best is the experience of contributing to the household. It's a lesson on giving, not just receiving. And sometimes, it's the gift of saying no.

Marlene Kurban

Dear Reader,

Let's face it, chores never go away. One day when I was feeling quite overwhelmed when facing a sink full of dishes, a mountain of laundry, piles of ironing, carpets covered in dog hair, and dust bunnies in every single corner of my home, I decided I was going to change my attitude. The change of attitude didn't happen over night, mind you, it has been a gradual process, yet it's working like a charm. What I failed to remember was that love never fails and when I began doing my chores with my new love-attitude I found myself happier and the chores were getting finished! Now, when I face that sink full of dishes, instead of sighing and feeling sorry for myself while dreading dishpan hands, I tell myself, "On these dishes, meals were served with love, helping my family grow healthy and strong" and I begin scrubbing away. Instead of procrastinating on that mountain of laundry, I picture toweling off my clean, wet children, fresh out the tub, with wonderfully soft and sweet smelling, freshly laundered towels. I am no longer letting the piles of ironing intimidate me, I now iron away and remember how much my husband appreciates crisply starched shirts. Not to mention how handsome he looks. The dog

hair that was driving me bonkers now reminds me of just how much I love our furry friends and vacuuming after them doesn't feel so burdensome. As I vacuum up the dog hair, I whip out that handy hose attachment and tackle those dust bunnies remembering how I love to walk on dust free floors. Chores never go away and that's okay because I can face them now that I have a new attitude of love.

Tina Roe

Dear Reader,

Love in the Bottom Drawer

As I entered my home, the sound of silence blared in my heart. My 4 year-old granddaughter, Taylor, had gone back to her home in Texas on Christmas day. My return from the airport brought an ache deep within me.

The lack of a beautiful blue-eyed girl, someone to read to and tuck in at night, made the space empty.

While I changed Taylor's new yellow and blue polka dot sheets, I thought of the nights that she had asked me to help her.

"Will you lift my hair?" Taylor had asked.

"Of course I will." It had made me smile.

When she was "little" she would have her tiny head on a big fluffy pillow. Being far from home, the quiet voice from a still face caught at my heart strings. She would lift her head slightly. I would reach under her head and lift her hair so that it was folded upwards under her head. As if she was being neat, perfect, not wanting to be any trouble.

Welcoming the chance to once again lift her hair, I had leaned over and felt the tender strands, soft and gentle.

Coming back to reality, looking at the empty bed, I began a search. Under the bed, behind the dressers. Everywhere I could think of.

On Taylor's previous visits there was an item accidentally left behind. All I could find that day was a lavender pony tail holder, thin, minute, but nonetheless something that had been worn by her, something that was now in my possession.

I opened the bottom drawer of my jewelry armoire. Tenderly, I lifted out the piece of flannel diaper, soft with washing, that had once been Taylor's burping cloth, and her tiny Lion King's underwear. I slipped the pony tail holder over both and placed them back in the drawer.

The next day, while doing the laundry there laid a new acquisition. A small white lace sock. It was in the dryer. Alone, forgotten.

With love, I walked it to my room, opened my drawer and tucked it in my love bundle.

One day I would have a collection that I could share with my granddaughter. Maybe she would realize how much love was in the bottom drawer.

Jody Pearch

Dear Reader,

My husband and I wanted children. When God didn't give them to us, we decided to try another route. That's right--we adopted a beautiful little 3 year old from Russia. So here is the story of a mother that is so excited about being a parent.

Holidays were lots of fun this year because we had someone special to introduce to them. Veeka had a nice time at Christmas picking out a tree, decorating it, and of course, opening her gifts. We had to practice Easter Egg hunts for her so that she would know what to expect at daycare. So you can imagine my disappointment as a Mom when she came home from school and I asked her how many eggs did she find at her Easter Party only to hear her answer, "One." I said, "Veeka, you only found one egg at the egg hunt." She replied, "Uh-huh, one bunch." Checking her basket I found eight eggs. She was more excited over the Easter Bunny that come to her school. She had given him a hug and he gave her some chocolate candy.

Veeka came to work with me for daughter day. I took her down the hall to help me make copies. She loved hitting the green button for me. So the other day I'm watching her sit there and tear the pages apart in her book. She presented them to me so proud of her self telling me that she had to make a copy of it. I'm glad I listened before I scolded her for ruining a good book.

We went to the mall after her birthday party at school. When it was time to go home, she sat down in the parking lot stating that she was not ready to go home yet. So we told her that she still had some birthday presents at home that needed to be opened. She decided that she would come home with us after all. Upon our arrival home, Veeka jumped out of the car and ran into the house. Then she looked up at me confused saying, "Where's the tree?" Bless her heart she wanted a birthday tree with presents like she had had a Christmas tree with presents. Yes, this is one happy lady to be a Mom!

Marilyn Dear Hunter

Dear Reader,

No Good Deed Goes Unpunished

One of the most memorable moments in my life involves my best friend, a kiddie pool and a good deed. Upon returning home one day, my best friend and I noticed a dark object in the kiddie pool in our back yard. Stepping out the back door, I quickly realized it was a baby robin, still alive. I rushed back into the house and grabbed my leather fishing gloves. Scooping the baby out of the water, I decided to sit in the sun and hold it. I thought that helping it dry off and warm up might save it. After an hour, I set it down on the warm sidewalk in the sun. As I watched, it seemed to gain some strength and my hope grew.

Then, from the corner of my eye I saw the neighborhood tom cat. It didn't take a rocket scientist to realize that, left alone; this would be ugly-a worse death than drowning. Of course, I couldn't just go in the house and let the nature of this scenario play out. So, I once again donned the gloves and went to do a good deed. When my gloved hands closed gently around the baby robin, it opened its mouth-and screamed. It was the call heard 'round the neighborhood. Now, I've never been a runner, but it's amazing how having your head dive bombed by a flock of robins can cause you to forget compassion and acquire speed.

Needless to say, the baby bird stayed on the sidewalk. I sprinted (no exaggeration) toward the back door, arms flailing over my head to ward off the feathered torpedoes. (After all, I have seen Hitchcock's *The Birds*.) I flung myself into the house and was greeted by my best friend doubled over in hysterical laughter. Yes, she had witnessed the entire course of events. It is an understatement to say that she was amused. For weeks following this adventure, no matter where we were, if there was a robin around she would point and say, "Hey look, there's one of your friends!"

If you ask her about it today, over 10 years later, she has to get through a bout of hysterical laughter before she can tell the story. I would experience it all again just to share this memory with her.

Connie S. Albert

Dear Reader,

Pure happiness is all the simple little things in life. Being eight years old and waiting for school to be over on a Friday afternoon because I get to spend the whole weekend at my grandparent's house.

Happiness is: swimming, playing in the park, drive-in movies. Relaxing on the living room floor, watching my favorite cartoons on television; then, just barely audible, hearing it - the tinkling bell from the ice cream truck and, YES, I have a quarter to spend.

Happiness is watching the trees dress up in all of their glorious colors. Stepping outside to that special little chill in the air that is just perfect for cuddling up, yet not too cold, and allowing the crisp air to paint my cheeks without the benefit of blush. Raking the leaves into a big pile and then just jumping in, relishing the explosion of color around me!

Happiness is: winter nights spent in front of a crackling fireplace after snowball fights and making snow angels! Happiness is spring, when life begins anew; experiencing all of the wonderful smells, taking a deep breath and my head spinning with the exhilarating fragrances. Happiness is holding my son in my arms for the first time, this precious little life that God has allowed me to bring into the world.

Close your eyes and think back to all those "special" little moments. Happiness is: falling in "love" for the first time, looking into that special someone's eyes and getting that warm, tingly feeling all over. Knowing by the look in their eyes they are feeling the same. Moments such as that lighthearted feeling of sleepovers with friends, sitting around in a big circle just giggling and feeling you are part of something and that something is truly amazing.

Happiness is being awakened bright and early in the morning by something warm and fuzzy jumping up on the bed and loving you unconditionally. All these little things and so many more are what happiness truly is. That feeling of fullness, bubbling over, that makes life worth living.

Happy Reading

Susan Biggs

Dear Reader,

"The Game"

It was sometime in the middle of February when we got the news: breast cancer. In my 30 years I had rarely seen my mother cry tears of fear, but I knew these were genuine. My mother, the one who never got sick, who never let anything, big or small, stop her, had cancer. She thought the lumps were just cysts; she had had them in the past and, with all the stress she had been under recently, figured these were more of the same. Shock was an understatement for both of us.

We walked out of the doctor's office with our arms around each other, me assuring her that everything would be okay. I'm never the panicky one; I make plans. What's next? What doctor do we need to talk to? Should we get a second opinion? Are you going to need surgery? What could I do? There were times I could be selfish, but this was not one of them. I've never felt so helpless in my life.

Surgery was next. Even being on Medicaid (she had lost her business in October and could not afford health insurance) things moved quickly. March 5th loomed in the near future. Her friends came to help; to take care of her and her animals. Some good news: it had not spread anywhere so all she would need was chemotherapy. Chemo. She moved in with us and the first couple rounds were as awful as we thought they would be. She shaved her head because she didn't want to leave a mess in the shower. Halfway through, the treatment changed and then she was just tired.

The chemo was finished and the three of us spent a day in the mountains to celebrate. She would be okay. Another surgery next month and a couple weeks to recuperate. Her hair has already started to grow back. Cancer was her nemesis - We won.

Jessica McInish

Dear Reader,

My husband says I have delayed gratification syndrome because if it were up to me I wouldn't open the Christmas presents until the last possible minute. But actually it's the anticipation that I love so much - the thrill prior to a vacation, the expectation of the weekend, the excitement of your son running for the medal, the desire of sleep after a long day, the anticipation of a new baby. Once the event itself arrives, I'm happy but I miss the gratification that led up to it.

Here's a simple story to illustrate my point: we were recently at the Wisconsin State Fair where they had a milk booth, which you would expect for the Dairy State. They were selling all kinds of flavors of milk - chocolate, strawberry, cherry vanilla, banana and root beer - for just 25 cents a cup. There was always a line of people but it moved fast. It was a hot day too, so who could resist a cup of ice cold milk for a mere quarter?

My favorite of course was strawberry (isn't it everyone's?), but I wouldn't succumb until the very end because it is my favorite and I wanted to save it for last. I first tried cherry vanilla (it was okay) and then later, chocolate (ho hum). I never did try the banana or root beer because those flavors did not appeal to me at all. No anticipation in those flavors! I finally gave in to the strawberry and was it ever so good! Yes, I know I risked that they may have run out of strawberry as they did with the chocolate - which must be everyone's favorite after all - but it was a chance worth taking! Otherwise, I would have missed out on the anticipation of delaying my gratification!

So, you see it wasn't so much the final product that made me happy but the thrill of the anticipation. Maybe next year we can all look forward to a cheese booth! The down side to the day was that after drinking all those cups and cups of WHOLE milk flavors, I realized the calories and fat grams that I must have consumed...

But that's for another column!

Diane M. Kitchen

Dear Reader,

I have been sitting our front room this evening thinking about various things life in general and have figured out that its really good, even with all the aches and pains that we experience as we age. But then remember that age is just a matter of mind, are as young as we feel, there are times when we still enjoy watching cartoons. We do enjoy the many things our two year old granddaughter does. And also my Mom who recently moved to Texas from Minnesota. She has a really nice place to live. We have been through many changes in our lives and for the most part they have been really great.

Patsy Goodman

Dear Reader,

I grew up quite poor in the 1980's. I often felt bad about this fact at school because that was the place where the comparison was most obvious between what others had and what I did not. In the spring of second grade, we were to have an Easter party at school, which included a contest for prettiest basket. Well, I begged my mother for a beautiful store-bought basket complete with plastic grass. It would be so colorful and wonderful and I just knew a basket like that could win the contest!

Needless to say, I did not receive a store-bought basket. Instead, my mother cut and dried Honeysuckle vines and wove a small basket for me. Then, before school on the morning of the party, she took me down to the creek in our pasture and she dug up sections of the green moss that grew by the banks and placed it in perfectly to cover the bottom of my basket. Finally, she picked a variety of wild flowers and wove them loosely into the handle and placed them carefully in among the moss bedding.

I loved that basket; although, I knew it would not be able to compete with all the wonderful purchased finery that my classmates would be bringing. I had accepted the fact that I would not be winning the contest, but I was very happy with what I had: not proud--secretly happy. So, I took my basket to school that day, and I did not win most beautiful basket. But...I did receive a prize (silly putty) for the most creative basket!

That incident changed my life. My epiphany at seven years old may seem obvious now, but until then I could not fathom that creativity and nature could possibly be valued above shiny new plastic. I mean: those things are FREE and available to EVERYONE!

Now, I strive to be able to give my children the same experiences that my mother provided to me. I can't weave baskets and we don't live in the country anymore, and even though I can afford to buy them things: I use my creativity to pass along the importance and the value of not having money.

Candra L. Thompson

Dear Reader,

Among Her Souvenirs

We found my mother's life crammed into a few cardboard cartons stored in a corner of the small apartment my mother and I shared. My sister and I spent an afternoon sorting through the contents of those boxes. It seemed a very sad testimony to a life of nearly 90 years.

But within those boxes were treasures that brought back many memories. Pictures, cards, letters, clippings. Columns I'd written for an Ohio newspaper, when short of time I'd title a column "Dear Mom" and tell of daily happenings in our busy household. She kept many of those columns or shared them with her sisters. "Erma" columns had notes on them; "Have you seen this one?" or, "Thought you'd like this one."

Among mother's personal things drifted the scent of her favorite bath powder, and a satiny sachet.

I remember Mother telling of traveling with her parents to Cleveland, Ohio, to hear John Phillip Sousa perform at the Great Lakes Exposition. When Sousa came into Ellis Island, she told, his name was So. He thought it too short, and added USA to it; thus, SOUSA.

She related a story of two women returning from an estate sale toting a granite ware pan full of treasures. The local dentist asked what Mrs. G. was going to do with the set of false teeth in the pan? Mrs. P. said, "She's going to use them to crimp her pies."

When Mom was a girl in grade-school she remembers sitting in class, the odor of catsup drifting through open windows from the Edwards canning factory down on Lake Street. She said "It wasn't so pleasant when they were cooking sauerkraut!"

Those few boxes didn't diminish the spirit of this sweet soul who filled our lives with laughter and love. At the bottom on one box was a letter.

The family has many inside jokes and puns. One favorite when signing off from a phone call or a letter, from an old radio/TV duo Bob and Ray, the letter from Aunt Margie ended with: "Write when you get work, and hang by your thumbs!"

Norma J. Sundberg

Dear Reader,

My life has been enriched over the years by the many pets who have found their way to our door. My veterinarian of more than twenty years has told me that I have a knack for attracting needy animals. From the long-haired gray kitten born at the chemical factory to my poor Mushka cat who was evicted from the

adult day care center for biting the clients to my current basset hound Fred who had been abandoned when his owner died, each pet has come with a special history. We had Max, a basset whose family had moved to the area from Australia, but didn't want to put him through quarantine when they moved back. He had so many medical problems. I remember sleeping on the floor by his side when he was too ill to jump up on the bed. There was our shepherd mix, Elde who had been dumped at the local animal shelter along with her nine newborn puppies. She was such a well-mannered lady, although somewhat shy. We lost her way too soon to a fast-moving brain tumor. The twins came to us from a lady who rescued feral cats in her local park. My initial intent was to adopt only one, but how could I not bring along one of her sisters to keep her company? Katie and Shelby are two of the most beautiful cats I have ever seen. Katie had always been the larger of the two, but suddenly began to lose weight at an alarming rate. My vet said she had suffered a lung infection or had severe asthma. With his help and medical expertise, Katie is now on the mend. I thought we would surely lose her.

I cannot imagine a life without pets. I have heard all of the arguments about shedding and ruined furniture and carpets, but my memories of pets that have passed on and the love of the ones that are with us today mean more to me than mere possessions ever could. So I mop floors and vacuum, happy in the knowledge that these special creatures truly love us and are content to share their lives with the strange people who adopted them.

Nancy Humber

Dear Reader,

Grandma's Dishes

"Grandma Mary, may I have your tea set when I get big?"

The query comes from four-year-old Maeve who is standing quietly, staring at a collection of flowery, sage-green-and-cream china temporarily stacked on the kitchen counter.

Appreciating the moment, I refrain from telling Maeve just yet that she is not actually looking at a tea set. She clearly thinks the dishes elegant and of great value. They are, if only from a sentimental standpoint. The Mikasa settings have been part of my life for as long as I can remember. A wedding gift to my mother three-quarters of a century ago, the set now occupies a special cache in my heart as well as the cabinet in my dining room. How many family feasts have these dishes served? How many more may be in store?

My mother was a good cook, roasts of every sort being her specialty. And no matter what the menu, she always included glittering glasses of sherry wine, which quite impressed me back then. Making toasts and taking careful sips seemed so grown-up, so sophisticated! Memories of candlelight, 'fancy' pickles, energized conversation, hearty laughter, heavy linen napkins, and the dessert-laden Duncan Phyfe buffet spark a familiar, almost forgotten feeling of warmth within me. Now all those anniversaries, birthdays, holidays, and visitors weave together into a colorful image-quilt of family and friends. Crafted entirely of thoughts and feelings, this 'quilt' inseparably accompanies my well-used set of dishes.

So, grateful for every cup, saucer, and plate, I prepare to pass on this trove of china, chips and all, to my granddaughter. I feel endued with a rich sense of hearth and home. I am satisfied.

"Of course, Maeve," I answer at last. "Enjoy!"

Mary Frances Doolin

Dear Reader,

Another day of the housewife. The what? Guess that means you and the house are one. We have lived here 31 years and yes it is home. A safe place where the grandkids come to visit and spend the day, the music of a guitar is always softly playing in the background. My husband loves to just play and practice. While he is in his room, with guitar and computer, I am in mine which is a room full of stamps and paper, stickers and adhesives. Can't have enough. When I find a bargain we add a little more to the shelves and bookcases filled with books, paper, pictures, and memories of any vacation that makes me smile.

I have gotten into the habit of sending each and every member of my family a birthday card, or anniversary card, any occasion that a card will fill a need. Some months it takes alot of time and creative thinking to fill the card with their own hobbies or sports, whatever they are into that year. I can't make it ahead of time cause you have to get the feeling of what is going on with them and then get started on the latest card. I love to send each card out with a little prayer and smile that will brighten their day. I always get their remarks saying they so look forward to checking the mail to see the newest creation just for them. What a simple thing to do for all those you love and know it gives a happy heart. With 5grandkids, 2 beautiful kids of our own, 10 siblings and in-laws, anyway there are at least 75 on the list and then the surprise cards some get just for that extra smile they were in need of. I love my "work" as I am a retired waitress of 20 years. Life keeps me busy and I look forward to each and every day here on the little ponderosa. We are blessed.

Norma Emery

Dear Reader,

Her name is Sofia, formerly known as Bijou.

I have always loved cats, and my home is not complete without two sweet, loving purr balls. Bailey is BIG, blue-eyed, demands affection, and loves every living creature. Rygel is sweet, shy, and long-haired. With two young healthy cats, and no 3 AM trips to the vet emergency room, I was again free to pursue my own interests, which include perusing the furniture listings on Craigslist. While there, I popped over to the pet posts.

There she was. A tiny Himalayan cat huddled in a metal cage, on the euthanasia list after her owner died. Everyone familiar with cats knows they don't always get along, and adding an elderly unknown female to the mix could permanently disrupt my quiet, peaceful home. But....

I contacted the shelter, and was advised Bijou was not eligible for adoption. As she would not submit to a vet exam, they could not determine whether she was spayed or healthy. I explained that as my boys are neutered, spay was not an immediate concern, and my vet could do a health check. They told me to come meet her.

On my arrival, I discovered that Bijou's owner had committed suicide, and no one who had known Bijou wanted her. Due to her questionable health status, she was living in the isolation room next to kennels full of barking dogs. When I reached in to her, she purred, rolled over, and well, you know the rest.

Happy ending? Not yet. This is one grumpy little cat. She bit my vet, who confirmed she is healthy and spayed. After a few days in a separate room to let her adjust, she growled and hissed at the boys. Bailey was smitten (but then, he loves everyone). Rygel was terrified. Why? Bijou climbed his cat tree, pounded on his face to wake him up, then attacked him.

Her name is now Sofia, after the feisty Golden Girl. It has been about five weeks, and although she still sometimes growls at the boys, she now sleeps on my bed next to them. Has she recovered from losing her owner? Who knows. But she is now safe, with us. She is part of the family.

Elizabeth Rosen

Dear Reader,

This last year has been good for my Family. I have three younger sisters, and a wife and thirteen aunts. Yes my mom is one of fourteen. This last year provided an insight into the kids she raised.

When she passed May after bravely fighting lung cancer following a bout with breast cancer some years before and pronounced cured I came out of the field and rejoined the family as leader and oldest brother and son.

It was difficult to lose her but when you regain all the rest it made it the best year ever, except when I met my wife of 36 years. I didn't really lose my mom, I found that she is always with you and then in turn I didn't not have a family they were just busy doing other things, like well living.

As you read this column and the story's of peoples lives and the way the books are offered try to live the story, because reading Suzanne's story and then the book gives this older gentleman a reason to approach life in a different fashion. I find myself using the phrases and the coping and the mental patterns as I live and doing turn people off they way I used to.

One of my mentors said don't get mad get even, well now I don't even get mad, I get better and even find that when I do the person that might have made me mad well changes too.

Just a thought from the side of the road.

R. Marshall Bennett

Dear Reader,

Its interesting how you find out who your true friends are when you are going through tough times. Everyone seems to want to be your friend when times are good and you want to share the good times with them as well. When you get engaged you can't wait to tell everyone the good news and to show off your ring, if you are a female though if the engagement ends you are ashamed to let anyone know about it. We don't like to admit our failures even if we aren't the one at fault, if we happen to have bad luck in our lives such as our significant other finding someone else or losing our job. When failure happens in your life you feel like your alone and you're ashamed to admit that you need help or even encouragement. Alongside the congratulations greeting cards and the Happy Anniversary greeting cards, maybe there would need to be a line of greeting cards to offer solace and encouragement for a loss of a job or a dream to let you know that you are not alone. Instead we like to keep bad news to ourselves since we are ashamed of bad luck happening to us.

Michele Minor

Dear Reader,

I have what many would call a large family: 8 children and 23 (so far) grandchildren. Most of the grandchildren live hundreds of miles away. Finances are a bit pressing, so my wife and I don't get to visit as often as we would like. About seven or eight years ago, I started writing each of my married children a letter weekly to keep in touch. At first they were hand written, but before long became computer generated. When my first grandchild learned to read, I realized this was a golden opportunity to try to connect with him. How many children get a personal letter today? How about a letter each week - personal and to only that child? For the past seven or so years, I have been writing a letter to each child who could read.

I kept the subjects fun for the child: my Army days, trucks, airplanes, buildings and such for the boys and other subjects for my granddaughters. Obviously many subjects are interesting to each. Along with the fun subject, I try to work in a moral or spiritual lesson for reinforcement of their parents training. Occasionally, I will get a letter back from one of my grandchildren just as I do sometimes from my children. That is nice, but my real reward is knowing I am giving each child and grandchild a rare gift: a personal letter. It forms a bit of stability in a storm tossed world.

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

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

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

Bill Burdick

Dear Reader,

People always tell me I'm so adventurous, but I always feel they couldn't be further from the truth. Yes, I mountain bike and kayak and like to go hiking when on vacation, but is that really adventure? For me, being adventurous intones ideas of climbing mountains or visiting foreign countries while not knowing the language. In my mind, the biggest adventures I take come printed on smallish pieces of paper, whisking me away to fantasy worlds. My love for books started quite young. I remember every summer walking the two blocks to the library, then wondering how I was going to get my treasure trove home. It was worse if I decided to ride my bike there.

My summers relied upon the written words of others to transport me to other worlds, times, places, and experiences. They based my future inspirations and adventures, so to say, by showing me the world beyond my small Illinois town. I learned about New England and whale hunting by a crazed captain. I read about adventures in England, a country that felt a million miles away. I visited other worlds by walking through a wardrobe with another little girl, going hand in hand to an unknown adventure. I spent time on the American prairies, learning about the hard life original settlers faced while moving toward the west and their American dream.

What joy it was when I was able to visit some of these places I had only read about! Driving across the vastness of Nebraska or Montana, I had a better inkling of what the world of Laura Ingalls Wilder may have looked like. Taking a visit to Plymouth Plantation in Massachusetts showed me a world where living was hard and reliance on the earth and ocean meant the difference between life and death. Those words now give me a greater appreciation for anywhere I visit and help to form the dream vacations I have for the future. If it weren't for books, my ability to thoroughly enjoy them, and the printed words they contain, I know my life and my world would be missing many more adventures.

Angela VanSchoick

Dear Reader,

Perhaps you heard or read the news regarding the pastor, Fred Winters, who was shot while delivering his Sunday sermon in Maryville, IL. Well, that was my church, my pastor. The first week following his untimely death was surreal. I didn't understand how this could happen. Obviously, I felt sadness, but I was angry as well. "UNFAIR" - That was the mantra that I held close to my heart those first few days. Oddly enough, it was at his funeral where I found joy. His wife, Cindy, gave a eulogy. She stated that she was not going to let this event make her bitter. She was not going to blame or hate. It was going to make her a better person.

So often, it's easy to let circumstances rule our life. Cindy could have easily let anger overtake her, and I'm certain no one would have blamed her. But, she chose to see the best in a bad situation, to learn from what was a devastating event, and to allow it to positively rather than negatively alter her life. Our church attendance has increased. People are more involved in church and in the community. Fred's death has not been in vain, and the lives of our church members will forever be altered. So, now instead of chanting "UNFAIR," I've decided to say - "How can I let this make me a better person?"

Breann Chastain

Dear Reader,

If you've ever wondered if there is life after this one, let me tell you, there is. 3 years ago I wouldn't have been as sure, but a lot has changed in my world since then.

For Christmas 2006, my Mom insisted that our entire family get together, at her house, for the first time ever in the 23 years I'd been alive. So, we all came to Indiana; my Aunt, Uncle, and Cousin, my Grandparents and Myself. Along with my Step-dad, the 8 of us packed into my parent's ranch style house, replete with 2 fully decorated trees, lots of lights, and the fragrant smell of cinnamon candles and fresh baked cookies. We had a wonderful traditional dinner and enjoyed the first and last Christmas we would all spend together.

Little did we know at the time, but my Mom would pass away 2 days before Christmas the following year. She had battled breast cancer, just like my aunt, but we all thought she was cancer free, including her doctors. She must have known otherwise.

In June, we were informed that the cancer had returned with a vengeance. As she prepared herself for the worst, she managed to arrange everything, from the songs that would be sung at her funeral, to where she wanted her ashes to be sprinkled. Other than keeping her as comfortable as possible, none of us had anything to arrange.

After her funeral, my Step-dad and I drove to the park where she wanted to spend eternity. It was a typical January day in Indiana; cloudy, dreary, and cold. As we got out of the car with the wooden box that held what was left of my mother's human body, the wind picked up. Not just a light breeze but strong gusts of bitter air. My Step-dad and I said our goodbyes to her and as we started to spread her ashes, the wind changed direction, completely, and then the sun came out. We laughed, knowing it was Mom's way

of telling us that we weren't quite in the location she had planned and that she was exactly where she wanted to be.

For all who have ever wondered if there was life after this. Yes there is and it is glorious!

Sarah Griffin

Dear Reader,

What I did during the summer was that I went to movies with my family. We got a swimming pool and we swam in it plus we have had lot's of barbeque's. Also I sometimes take my nice's or nephew's to the library with me to hang out and enjoy some time together. Sometimes we would play board games together.

Shontel Redfield

Dear Reader,

I never experienced a midlife crisis until the fall of last year when I fell down several flights of stairs as a result of a bad reaction to prednisone which I was given for a severe rash. I already deal with the challenges of being blind and had to come to terms with the possibility that I narrowly missed becoming paralyzed.

Being surrounded in the hospital by doctors and other medical professionals--obviously successful, I reflected on my past accomplishments and how the past decade seems to have been a major flop. I thought about friends and how I seemed to have lost several, sighted and blind alike, because I had not continued my meritocrat's journey up the ladder of success! I have had to realize that sometimes to receive new gifts and blessings, one has to let go of the old ways of thinking and defining what it means to be successful which society hammers into us, let the old attachments to past friends drop away, and be open to the possibilities of the future. It's hard, I don't do it well, and some days, I relapse. It's a process that is always changing, a destination, not always arrived at.

David Faucheux

Dear Reader,

I've reached a milestone, I turned 50 this year. To some people this may seem awful but to me it means I've reached a point in my life where I'm happy with whom I've become. I no longer care what others think of me or if they judge me for how I look, what I'm wearing, or what I do. I realize in this life that there are more important things than looking and being perfect by someone else's standards.

The time I spend with my son and getting to be there for him means more to me than whether I have gained an extra 1 or 2 pounds, okay maybe 5 pounds. I gave birth at 30 yrs old and had trouble with the pregnancy so now when I look at him I realize what a special gift I was given. I've experienced the blessings and heartaches that come from being a parent and although it hasn't always been easy, I am very thankful.

I had 1 perfect sister and 11 perfect cousins, according to my Dad's family. I was the only one that did not measure up to their standards, I am my Mom made over and that wasn't good enough for my Dad's family. They are tall and slender; I am shorter and pleasantly plump (sounds nicer than heavy). I could have discovered the cure for cancer, received the Nobel Peace Prize and my Dad's family would have said: "Did you have to wear that dress, it really doesn't fit your body type well" or they may have said: "Can't you do something with that hair of yours". Something amazing happened to me when I turned 50, I now look in the mirror and no longer hear their negative comments but instead see a person who has struggled and succeeded in overcoming many hardships in her life.

Life for me hasn't been easy, but the struggles have made me the person I am today and that's not bad. I've raised a wonderful son, have a responsible job, have good friends, and a good marriage. Am I perfect: NO, but I know I'm a work in progress and that's good enough for me.

Rebecca Nunn

Dear Reader,

Oh No You Didn't!!! I think I even said the words out loud as I raced through the back door, through the porch door and out into the yard. There laying on the bird feeder was a tiny green hummingbird, knocked down by one of his own. We have a bully in the yard. I like to think of them as siblings with the larger one the older brother and given to pushing the smaller one around.

The little guy (named Popeye in hopes of giving him stature) wasn't dead, just stunned after being slammed by his bigger brother, Brutus. I could see if there was an Olive Oyl in the wings waiting, but Brutus was protecting the feeders. He has decided that all three hummingbird feeders in the yard belong to him and he is diligent about keeping everyone run off.

I stood by while Popeye gathered his wits about him and popped up. After buzzing around my head for a few minutes he decided that maybe I could help him in his quest for food. He buzzed over to the feeder, then back to me. After a couple of minutes I got his drift and walked over to stand close to his favorite feeder. He had only had a few sips when along comes Brutus.

BUT--even though Popeye quit drinking and seemed to brace him self for the hit, Brutus stopped and hovered in the air looking toward me. Like most bullies he was not sure if he wanted to tackle someone bigger (and meaner!). After a couple of false starts he decided to land on the rose trellis to see if he could stare Popeye down. Popeye seemed to grow larger as I watched him drink and drink and drink. He

had discovered that there was something that Brutus was afraid of and it seemed to inspire courage in him. They now share the large feeder, though Brutus still "owns" the smaller two. But, Popeye has unlimited access to the big one and he continues to strut his stuff around it, knowing that I'm keeping an eye out from the kitchen window.

Brenda Logan

Dear Reader,

"Stop!" That seems to be the word of the month. At least it is for my two year old as he screams it to me while I'm trying to do the basics such as wash his face, put clothes on him or brush his teeth. It's not that my son doesn't want to do any of these things. He just doesn't want me to do them for him. He is starting to do the basics by himself and doesn't want help. But I'm not hurt; I understand his need to try doing new things. It is amazing how much independence comes in such a small package.

Then there are those times I savor like when he first sees me after work. I leave for work before he wakes up in the morning so this is the first he sees me all day. He shouts "Mommy!" as he runs up to me and gives me a huge hug. At this time he has forgotten that he is an independent little man. When I was younger, I always wanted to be a Mother. It's something I knew in my heart. But even now I am still awe struck. I often sneak into my children's rooms (I also have a beautiful 4 month old baby girl) and gaze upon them. I cannot picture life without them. These small little bundles are my world even on those hard days when my son is coloring on the T.V., floor and walls or when my daughter is just not happy. While I imagined being a Mother, I never pictured it would be like this. Motherhood has been trying at times but more rewarding than a mind can fathom. I didn't think I could love so much that my heart breaks when they hurt.

My life is not perfect but it is so rewarding. I have two beautiful children and a husband I adore. For me, outside of my friends and family, everything else is just fluff. While work is necessary and often times rewarding, if I lost my job tomorrow, it would not change the core of my life. The job is replaceable. Those I love are not. Live. Laugh. Love. That is the motto I live by.

Rosalie Szabo

Dear Reader,

Last week I was at the grocery store, unloading my shopping cart onto the check-out conveyor belt, like I've done thousands of times in my long and illustrious career as an everyday housewife. I was quite proud of myself. The cart was only about a third filled, so this quick stop for a few things wasn't going to cost me an arm & a leg.

As I was waiting with my now empty cart, behind a lady who was taking way too long to write a check, I started rummaging through my purse for my checkbook. I wanted to be ready with my debit card when it was my turn to pay up.

Suddenly an uneasy, queasy feeling came over me. I knew in an instant that I'd left my checkbook at home. In my mind's eye, I could see it lying there by my computer, where I'd accessed the calculator to strike a reasonably accurate balance.

Great day in the morning! I'd forgotten my checkbook! What a helpless, sinking feeling to ruin my day. Since I live twenty miles out in the country, it wasn't like I could quickly run home and get it. I had maybe \$2 in change in the coin keeper in my purse. Before the checker could start ringing me up, I was putting my items back in the cart to return them to their proper shelves.

When my son worked at the grocery store, he told me the items people changed their minds about and put back on the shelves are called "orphans," because they are rarely put back where they belong. He said it was common to find a bag of cookies sitting on the shelf with furniture polish or a package of steak tucked in among the loaves of bread.

Well, I wasn't about to just start scattering orphans all over the store. And I wouldn't think of simply abandoning my cart of groceries and sneaking out. That's just not right! I mentally inventoried the contents of my cart and formulated a plan to put them all back exactly where I got them. And to do it in an organized manner, so I wouldn't have to back-track all over the store.

The experience was humiliating. I felt like a petty criminal who had decided to go shopping with no money, got caught, and had to put all the stuff back. It only took half the time to put it back as it did to shop for it, but still, it seemed to take forever.

And all the while I was trying to figure out the logic of having my debit & credit cards, as well as any cash I may be holding, all tucked into my check book. I mean, I may forget my checkbook at home, especially if I've been writing out bills or balancing the account. But I'll always have my purse with me. Doesn't it make much more sense to carry cash & plastic in a separate pocket in the purse, as far from the checkbook as possible? Then I would never face this humiliating annoyance again.

The trip to town wasn't a total loss, though. I had accomplished some other important errands before I went to the grocery store. It's just that on my way home, my face burned red, like I was being slapped all the way back home for my forgetfulness.

I decided not to tell my family about my misadventure.

No need to worry them...

C.C. Godar

Dear Reader,

One of Life's Embarrassing Moments! My husband was career air force for 23 years. One of his tours of duty was a 3 year tour at a location in Japan near Tokoyo. It was called Grant Heights Housing Area,

and there was a complete base functioning at that site. We lived in a one story duplex, and our next door neighbor happened to be a male nurse and his wife and their little baby daughter. He received orders for his next base of assignment and wanted to sell his car. Since my husband needed his car to get back and forth to work - a weather site about 13 miles from the housing complex - we decided to purchase their car. It was a decrepit Renault 4CV and the gas gauge did not work. At that time, gas was a price of 13 cents a gallon at the gas station in the complex. The first day after we got the title transferred to our name – I took the Renault to the gas station to fill it up. In those days, the pumps were manned by Japanese nationals. It did not take him long to fill it up and when he came to the window of the car for me to pay him - he was grinning broadly. "Almost 1 gallon" he said. "That will be 10 cents, please". We both then burst out in gales of laughter! We drove that vehicle until our tour was up and sold it to someone just arriving, that needed transportation. Little cars were in demand - as the streets of Japan were very narrow and most American made cars were a real danger to drive on those streets!

Pat Swaney

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