

[The Write Place At the Write Time](#)

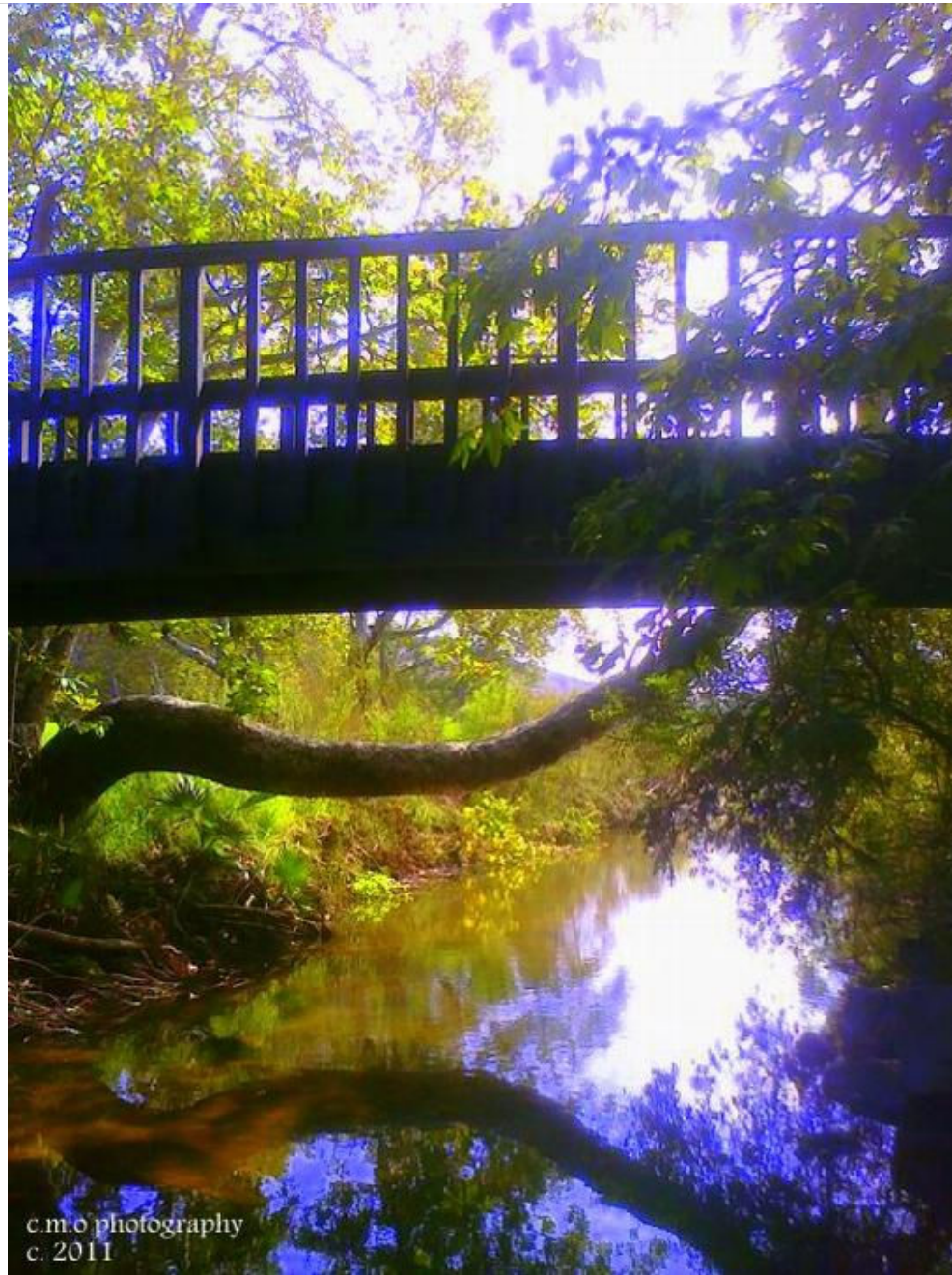
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"Our Stories"

We have decided to devote a portion of our magazine to non-fiction. These are stories of things that have happened serendipitously, being in the right place at the right time or just heartfelt musings, thoughts, and feelings on life. Join us in our non-fiction section. These stories speak to anyone and everyone and are told by anyone and everyone who has a story to tell.



"Bridge" by C. Michelle Olson; <http://www.cmichelleolson.com/>

Decompression

by Terry Oparka

I reached for a Styrofoam glass of water that was next to my bed in the ICU with my flailing right arm and crushed it, spilling water all over the table and the surgical resident. My fingers, then, were basically useless and typing or handwriting was out of the question. The tribe of neurosurgeons couldn't tell me why my arm lurched into the air when I came out of anesthesia. I had a procedure to decompress the Chiari malformation at the base of my brain, the balance and coordination center.

A rare condition with rare complications.

"I'm not doing this," I said, as my arm shot up.

Usually a congenital birth defect, it went undetected until my 53rd year, after persistent pain on the left side of my face, the sensation of a live wire in the left side of my neck, numbness on my scalp and left side of my chest, slight drooping on the right side of my face, smelling things like ammonia and Windex that weren't there, and my inability to walk in a straight line finally led me to the neurologist. He didn't smile once during my exam.

After a MRI of the brain and spine, he gave me the diagnosis, this time with a smile.

"I thought I was looking for a tumor," he said. "This is benign and you can be fixed."

He told me to avoid any jarring activities in the meantime.

At last I had an explanation for my weird ailments.

I lined up a world-class surgeon and just wanted to get the procedure over with. Both surgeons my husband and I consulted said that they couldn't guarantee that I would get relief or better from my present symptoms, but said I would not get worse, i.e., end up unable to walk or use my hands due to the syrinx, or fluid sack seeping down my spine, that shouldn't be there and was damaging nerves, that surgery would aim to alleviate.

The second opinion guy described the condition as a walking time bomb that could send me into a stroke if I got into a car crash or took a bad fall.

Inexplicably, my surgeon was running late the day of my surgery. I had the notion that I should just get up, get dressed, and leave. It was elective surgery, after all.

I inexplicably stayed put and asked the anesthesiologist to say affirming, positive things during the procedure.

He promised he would.

The surgeon told my husband the procedure went well, although the tonsil protruding off the base of my brain was tightly compressed to my vertebra in two places.

Following my surgery, I couldn't walk, sign my name, hold or dial a phone or use a computer mouse — a bit of a problem if you are a newspaper reporter, and more of a problem if you are the sole breadwinner carrying the medical insurance. The therapists called it ataxia and I heard the word "quad," as in quadriplegic, more than once.

My husband put his arms around me while I sobbed. How could I pay for medical treatment if I didn't have insurance because I couldn't work?

Was I willing to go into in-patient rehab and do therapy for three hours a day, the doctors asked?

Yes, I was, although I couldn't sign the consent papers.

I couldn't wash, dress, or go to the bathroom without help. And feeding myself was a fiasco.

I pitched an apple across the dining room in an attempt to hold it in my right hand, aka the claw, which was in worse shape than my left hand. Lucky for me, I am left-handed. Also lucky for me, I had all my words, I thought, and full speech, unlike some of the stroke folks on my rehab unit.

Using my hospital sock feet, I wheeled myself to the computer in the lounge of the rehab unit where I lived for three weeks over the Christmas holidays. I sorted through my work e-mail, typing very slowly at first with two fingers and my daughter working the mouse, which I couldn't manage.

I couldn't put it off any longer. I wedged the telephone between my ear and the pillow, and after three tries to punch the right numbers, I told my boss in my heartiest voice that I would be out longer than I thought, because of surgical complications that I described as spasms in my arms and legs.

My newspaper is a family-owned weekly with 18 papers covering different cities in a large metropolitan Midwestern city delivered to homes by the U.S. Postal Service. I have been a staff writer there for 11 years.

My boss said I sounded normal enough, and told me not to worry about returning the company laptop to the office during my convalescence, and not to worry about anything. I had accrued about six weeks of fully paid sick time I hadn't used in the last 11 years.

My editor was grateful I was able to forward newsworthy emails to her. She didn't know I did it painstakingly with three fingers and my daughter's help.

I was determined to do my job again. And I had about six weeks to get there.

It took me a long time to get to my writing life.

Although I was the feature page editor of my high school newspaper, "The Mottarian," I didn't go to college to study journalism straight after I graduated from high school in 1976. I was the oldest of four, and although my father had a good job in skilled trades at General Motors, he didn't think he could work enough overtime to send all four of his children to four-year college.

So, I took jobs at a couple insurance companies, got married, and had a couple kids. When I was pregnant with my second, I took a creative writing class at a local community college. The teacher liked my poetry and short stories, and suggested places to submit my stuff. I did, got a poem published, and ached to get better at what I couldn't stop doing, writing.

I asked my husband for a word processor and churned out words on my kitchen table while my children napped. The only bits I could get published were a short story in the long defunct "Lefthander's International Magazine," a greeting card verse for Oatmeal Studios, which is still around, and feature stories for the local weekly newspaper delivered to our home by the U.S. Postal Service, (not my paper back then, yet).

When the kids were 3 and 5, we moved houses and started our 5-year-old in kindergarten. I got a job with a large daily newspaper part-time in the Classified Ad department, long before Craigslist. My typing got flashflood fast since the faster you could type, the more sales commission you could make taking used car ads and talking the customers into running in the paper for seven days.

I also took a news writing class at the local four-year university, on a non-matriculating basis, since I wasn't admitted as a student there, to see if I had the chops to be a journalist.

Turns out I did.

So I took the long, slow way through J-school and graduated, finally, in 1995. Still it took me five years to quit my good-paying job as an ad taker to cover school boards, city councils, crime and human-interest stories for my newspaper.

And still I wrote poems, short stories and a couple novels with fast keyboard fingers, after composing them in longhand, when I didn't have my nose stuck in a book or magazine.

Words were my job and words were what I did when I wasn't cooking or knitting or being a wife, mother, daughter, sister or friend. I was lucky I still had the words in my head after surgery – but could I use my fingers to get them on a screen or take notes on paper, or even turn the pages to read a newspaper, book, or magazine?

My friend and fellow reporter assured me that plenty of people in our newsroom typed with one or two fingers. And had I heard of tape recorders? I could still type faster than my husband or my boss. But my friend also said if she couldn't write: she wouldn't want to live.

I didn't either.

When I got home from in-patient rehab, I went through my work e-mail, made a couple of phone calls to regular sources on my beat, and put together a couple of super lame short pieces. They took me about double the time it would have taken me before. I emailed them into my editor, with the caveat that they were lame stories. She gratefully accepted them. I offered to do short community news, crime items and a couple of lame stories each week from home in-between outpatient rehab sessions.

She said yes.

I watched my city council meetings on webcast and scribbled notes that became increasingly less like scrawl as the weeks passed. I did phone interviews with a headset, because I still couldn't hold a phone with my right hand while I took notes with my left hand.

I dutifully rolled putty, folded laundry and tried to pick up coins with my recalcitrant fingers as my occupational therapist suggested. I also turned my hands palm side down, then palm side up in sets of 10, as directed. I caught and tossed beanbags during therapy while my husband read a book in the waiting room and did everything the physical therapist said to get my gait and balance back. Those people changed my life and earn every penny they are paid.

And every day I pressed computer keys with fingers that felt stiff, weak and uncoordinated.

January crawled away and my typing, balance and stamina improved a bit.

I could sign a legible signature and cook easy meals. February brought us our first granddaughter, who I was afraid to hold for fear my weak arms would drop her, and an MRI that showed my brain stem and neck to be stable.

My fingers couldn't and still can't detect what is out of sight; I can't put my hand in my pocket and tell, without seeing it, the difference between the fabric and a tissue.

But I can easily walk a mile. And my fingers find the letters on the keyboard with increasingly strength and agility.

As my progress inched along, I found I was surprisingly tolerant of things that would have sent me ballistic before; photo assignment snafus, the endless back and forth with some sources; editor questions, and a husband leaving his stuff all over the place.

I wish I could say that I am always optimistic that the rest of the stuff I lost after surgery will come back. I also wish I could say that I don't lose my temper when I drop something, again.

My neurologist gave me the green light to drive and return to work in mid-February. My hair has grown back in the small spot where they shaved it and the incision is not noticeable.

I hobbled back to work on days it isn't icy and meet my deadlines, which no longer stressed me out.

The words and the stories come, easier some moments than others.

Family Matters

By Beth McKim

About twenty years ago, when I went to my family's annual reunion for the first time, it was like looking in a mirror. All around me were kinfolk who I either did not know or hadn't seen for many years. Yet, I shared amazingly similar physical characteristics, like curly hair, round faces and eerily similar voices, with many of them. People had come from all parts of Alabama and surrounding states and there was no denying the wonder of genetics.

And at the reunions, the memories always come flooding back. Like the summer I spent time with my grandparents in the country where I learned to eat fried okra, cornbread, and grits for the first time. Or the times when my cousin and I used our granddaddy's flashlight to make runs to the outhouse at night. Or sitting on the front porch listening to the men argue about politics and share fox hunting stories.

I still enjoy talking politics. And my love of Southern cooking continues to this day, although I eat a low fat, mostly vegetarian form of it now. Since I might be the only person who eats this way at the reunion, I am quiet about it there, as I am with other things.

Other good growing-up memories come to me such as studying the Civil War all but about two weeks of each school year when we studied the Revolutionary and all other wars, swaying side to side at football games while singing "Dixie" and shouting "The South will rise again!", and being strictly instructed at home to call black people 'Nee-grows' and never the other word that we heard used, sometimes by our own extended family members. We were also taught not to laugh at or repeat jokes we heard about 'Nee-grows'.

One memory is especially vivid. At about age seven, I attended a picnic for families with two of my favorite relatives, Aunt Mary and Uncle Charles and their son, Jimmy, at East Lake Park in Birmingham. I felt like such a big girl going there without my parents, who had not been invited. The afternoon was filled with kickball, swimming, chase, and Red Rover. The mouth-watering smells and tastes of barbecued pork, baked beans, potato salad, chocolate pies, watermelon, and hand-churned ice cream were the perfect follow-up to our rowdy, carefree afternoon of childhood pleasures.

But the part I never forgot came next. When it got dark, I looked around and noticed there were only women left in the picnic area. The men had

moved to the area beside their cars, which were parked under some nearby trees. When they emerged from the parking area, I noticed they had donned long white robes and covered their heads with hoods. Carrying wooden crosses, they moved toward a fire someone had started. They prayed loudly and sang church songs I had heard before. They threw their crosses into the fire and looked mad and happy at the same time. When I asked Aunt Mary why they did that, she told me "Well, honey, they have their reasons."

But when I got home I asked Mom and Dad the same question. Dad picked up the phone and called Uncle Charles and said they should not have taken me there and I could not go back again. It was then I realized how much I hadn't liked it but it was many years later when I learned exactly why. It was also years later that I fully understood how lucky I was to have parents who, not only did not condone such activity, but were actually appalled by it.

Two of the toughest years for me at the reunion were 2008 and 2009, coinciding with the election of President Obama. A certain segment of relatives, probably out of fear, were especially vocal and greeted me and others with questions like "Why does Obama like to play basketball? Cause he likes to run, shoot, and steal." I silently prided myself on the evolution of my response to these poor attempts at humor, from laughter when I was young, to nervous giggles, as I grew older, to the stony silence I responded with at those reunions. I save my "That's not funny and I don't appreciate your saying that" for when I am not at a once-a-year family get-together.

I think, hopefully, things are changing. There are now at least two generations younger than mine represented and I have not heard the racist political rhetoric from them that I heard from their parents and grandparents. Since many family members now have achieved college and post-graduate degrees, I like to think this contributes to the diminishing amounts of hatred.

I love my hometown, state, and most of all the family members, who I resemble, and who are always happy to see me, if only once a year. Now, will someone please pass me some more "Paula Deen's" sweet potato casserole and a little of the strawberry pretzel salad that Aunt Mary made?

Last year, a young couple arrived with an adorable black infant. In the beginning, there were stares and whispers as folks tried to figure out who the tiny party crasher was. Turned out it was my second cousin's son's daughter, adopted recently by her and her husband. Baby Sheila turned out to be the belle of the ball and everybody wanted a turn to hold her. Let the healing continue.

Excerpt from *Sensitivity 101...The Search for Acceptance* by Philip Nork

The way people come into your life at precisely the time they do, can make one wonder if our lives are planned out in advance. People seem to arrive just when you need them, or when they need you. And the beauty of it is, sometimes even a small gesture can have a profound effect on you.

Jenna

All through first grade I was in the same class as Jenna. She was a short, roundish shaped girl who had a beautiful personality. She was the most popular girl in our class and the prettiest. She had long blonde hair that her mom put up in pigtails, and always tied with green ribbons. Jenna had freckles on her nose and under her eyes and always seemed to have a radiating glow around her.

Being that we were both smart, Jenna and I were always in the same groups. I often made her laugh with the silly things I did. I had a crush on

her but didn't know what to do about it. I remembered the talk Nana and I had about being different, sincere, and making people feel special.

One spring morning, my mom had the radio on during breakfast and the song, "Up, Up and Away" came on. It was a catchy tune, even to a six year old, so I found myself humming it on the way to school. When I reached the schoolyard, all of my classmates were waiting outside for the bell to go in. This was my opportunity to make Jenna feel special and to let her know how I felt about her.

Now I wasn't a great singer or even a good one, but I put a lot of feeling into everything I did. I started to sing, "Up, up and away with my beautiful, my beautiful Jenna" to the melody in my head. The other kids looked at me like I was crazy, but Jenna had a cute little smile on her face.

I sang this little song every day before school and Jenna would always give me her special smile. It made me feel good inside to be accepted by her. One day during lunch she came up to me, gave me a small hug, and said, "I really like being friends."

Later in the school year, Jenna had an outdoor birthday party and invited me to come. When I arrived, I couldn't believe my eyes. Her backyard was completely decorated in her favorite color, which was green. There was green crepe paper, green paper hats, and green helium-filled balloons everywhere. Her birthday cake was decorated with green trim and had green icing.

It was a great party and toward the end we gave her presents. Mine had a yellow silk rose taped to the box. After we had cake and ice cream, her mom wanted to do something special, so she waved all of us kids close to her and explained her plan.

"Everyone get a balloon." She said. "Once everyone has one, we will let them fly into the air and I want you to make a wish." Her intent was to teach us a lesson, and she added, "In life there will be times when you need

a friend. Find a friend here today and tie your balloons together, they will fly higher and the chances of your wishes coming true will be better.”

Jenna and I immediately decided to tie our balloons together. As they slowly ascended skyward, Jenna smiled at me and said, “I wanna be friends forever.” As the balloons disappeared from sight, I sang my little song to her while we held hands and agreed to always be friends.

As Jenna and I went through the rest of that school year and the next, almost every morning I would sing my little song to her and she would either smile back at me or give me a little hug that said thanks. Jenna and her family moved away the summer between second and third grade. At the start of third grade, when Jenna did not show up for class, I was devastated. I didn't know where she had moved to or how to get in touch with her. I started to retreat from the other kids. I didn't want to get hurt by getting close to someone else only to have them leave.

One person I really connected with was my great-grandmother, I called her Nana. The two of us could sit and talk about anything for hours. She would tell me stories about when she was growing up. She also taught me the first lesson of my journey: “You are going to meet many people throughout your life and if you want them to remember you, you must always be a little different, you must be sincere, and you must make them feel special, especially the girls.”

She died when I was ten and I was devastated.

We changed schools after the sixth grade. By then I was feeling the effects of my parent's divorce. As I was going through all this, my mom kept on moving forward. She would not allow anyone to talk bad about my father in the presence of us kids. However, there was one place where she let it all out. My mom had several friends in our neighborhood. There was the other divorced lady from down the street, the separated lady who lived across the street with her three daughters, some ladies from her chapter of Parents Without Partners, and the lady next door who was widowed. When these ladies all got together to drink and discuss men, after they thought we kids

were all asleep, I would listen very intently. They talked about how most men were basically inconsiderate, lazy, and irresponsible. They all had a great distaste for men at this time of their lives and I found I couldn't disagree with them.

I had retreated further into my own little world. Starting school fresh at a junior high was not going to be fun for me, and I was very anxious. There was only one junior high in our town, so all the grade schools combined into this one for the two years before high school started. This is where I ran into Jenna again.

She was standing amidst a group of girls before the first day of school started, talking, and I was very ecstatic to see her again. She still had her freckles and wore her hair in those pigtails with green ribbons, but she had grown. She was taller and skinnier and seemed to be very popular among her new friends. I wanted to say hi to her, but felt very small in the presence of her girlfriends. Not in stature, even though I was still short for my age. I just didn't feel comfortable around crowds of people, especially ones that I did not know. I wanted to make an impression, but not make an idiot out of myself. I thought back to the first lesson Nana had taught me about being different but sincere.

I walked up behind Jenna and said, "Up, up and away, babe."

When she heard those words, she spun around and gave me an incredible hug along with that smile of hers. It had not changed throughout the years. It was big, full, and made my heart warm.

One of her friends shot me a strange look and asked, "Jenna, who's the weirdo?"

I was ready to walk away embarrassed. I thought I had made a mistake approaching Jenna in front of her friends.

To my surprise, Jenna replied very gently, “Leave him alone, he isn’t weird. He’s a friend.”

I smiled, thanked her, and left. Throughout the next two years every time I saw Jenna I repeated my phrase to her. She always gave me her biggest smile in return.

High school came and once again Jenna and I attended the same school. But again we went our separate ways. She had new friends, different interests, and we never hung out in the same groups. Jenna had continued to be very popular and, to say the least, I was not, nor was I accepted by her new friends. Even though we had drifted apart, every time I would see her, I would say, “up, up and away, babe” and she always smiled back.

Graduation day finally arrived and even though I had graduated early, I came back to march with my class. Our class that year was one of the school’s largest, around 300 students. Instead of holding the ceremony in the gym, it was held on the football field. They had decorated the field in our school colors, green and white. There were green and white crepe paper streamers everywhere, and on the back of every chair were green and white helium-filled balloons.

We sat through all the ceremonies and finally, after the last diploma was handed out, it was time to celebrate. Normally, that meant the graduates would take off their caps and toss them into the air. This year they were afraid someone would get hurt, so the principal announced that he wanted us to celebrate by letting the balloons fly into the air and make a wish that our dreams would come true.

As soon as he finished saying this, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around and there stood Jenna. She asked me, “Do you remember my first grade party when we tied our balloons together and said we’d be friends forever? You were my first friend, and still my best friend.”

I've always been a very emotional person, and it became apparent as tears welled up in my eyes. Jenna asked, "Can we tie our balloons together again like we did back then?"

I nodded and we grabbed two balloons, tied them together and as they flew higher and higher, I began to sing "up, up and away" to her. She smiled her smile that I had gotten to depend on so much and kissed me on the cheek.

Jenna looked at me now with tears in her own eyes, and said, "I will never forget how sweet you have been. It has meant a lot to me. Thanks for being you."

As we watched the balloons disappear, we realized that they were both green in color, just like they were so many years ago at her party.

I had no idea that such a small gesture made so long ago could make such a long-lasting impact on someone. Nana was right when she told me to be sincere and to treat the girls special. And by being different, I had cemented a small place in Jenna's life. For a short amount of time, we had become one. We touched each other in ways that no one else could relate to. We shared a connection that was as pure as a friendship can be.

I have not seen Jenna since that day, so I do not know if she still remembers me or not. But every time I see a balloon ascending into the sky, I feel the magic of her smile.

Having a Daughter and Letting Her Go

by Adrienne Pine

The desire to have children is something that many people of my generation took for granted, especially in the deep South, where I was born and raised.

But I felt differently. I grew up in a family where I was abused. As the oldest of five children, I bore the brunt of my mother's jealous rages and my father's twisted desires. I left home as soon as I could, but my mind and heart were still trapped and imprisoned.

I was afraid of marriage, I was afraid of parenthood. However, fortunately for me, I met my life partner, whom I will call Keith, when we were both 20 years old, and by the time we had been living together for four years, it seemed to us that marriage would be a continuation of the life together that we already had.

And so it was, at first.

After we were married, Keith went back to school. He earned two more degrees. He found a job and began to establish himself in his chosen profession. I was comfortable—maybe too comfortable—and I didn't want to change. For a long time, I turned a blind eye to the truth that Keith wanted something more than our life together.

I was afraid of becoming like my mother. But it went farther than that—in those days, I found myself generally disapproving of parents. The parents I encountered as an artist teaching writing in the public schools seemed only interested in putting forward their own children. I found their self-interest reprehensible; I thought they ought to concern themselves—as I did—in each child as an individual.

This was neither the first time nor the last that I claimed the moral high ground as a refuge.

One day Keith said to me that his life would be incomplete without a family. He wanted to have a child, and that if I didn't want that with him, he didn't want to be married to me.

I was in a quandary: I loved Keith, and I didn't want to lose him. But could I

become a parent without being overwhelmed by motherhood, as my mother had been? Keith and I couldn't bridge this gap alone; I suggested couples therapy, and he agreed.

Couples therapy was arduous. It was one-half step forward and one-quarter step back. We had allowed ourselves to grow apart from each other, and we suffered from it. And yet despite our differences, we remained connected. Deep down we shared a strong foundation and an abiding love that rooted us and entwined us like Odysseus' and Penelope's marriage bed carved out of the base of an ancient olive tree. In order to survive, our marriage would have to grow like a living tree.

The change occurred gradually, like a seed cautiously putting out tendrils underground, until one day I knew the plant had taken root, and I told my husband I was ready. Back in my mind lurked the response of a classroom teacher I'd worked with years ago. Newly pregnant with her second child, she was heroically struggling with morning sickness while continuing to teach. She had a six-year-old daughter, close in age to her students. I asked her if having students helped her understand her daughter better. "No, it's the opposite," she replied. "My daughter helps me to understand my students better."

"Ripeness is all"—once my mind and heart had changed, our bodies willingly cooperated. How fortunate at this time in our middle-aged lives that Keith and I were able, with great joy and little fuss, to produce a child. Had we not, how far would we have trod down the tortuous path that leads from infertility? Thankfully, we never had to face this question. I continue to feel humbly grateful that I was able to give my husband what he most wanted. Laugh all you like, but about certain important things, I have an instinct.

It is inevitable that our most profound emotions sound trite, because their very universality turns them into clichés.

When I became a parent, I still agreed with my younger self that judged parental attitudes as the height of selfishness, and at the same time that I

acknowledged the complicated selflessness that is parenthood's territory. I tried to embrace both with a sense of irony and restraint. What I had not anticipated was the relief that would come of putting our child rather than ourselves at the center of our concerns. After years of self-examination, I'd grown sick of myself. My own problems, weaknesses, and insecurities—and Keith's as well—resisted change. How much more satisfying to focus on our child and our efforts to give her a secure and loving home, a happy childhood, and a good education.

Having a child is a way to experience childhood all over again in a better version. Attention to the earlier part of life helps to keep one's outlook youthful. As a parent, one is so focused on the present moment and its constant demands that when one looks back with a perspective and comprehends the changes wrought by the passage of time, it can come as a shock.

As our daughter approached high school graduation and her eighteenth birthday, we found ourselves at one of those crossroads where we were invited to take the long view back. For a few weeks, we cherished our last connections to the parents of other high school seniors. With some, our shared experiences dated back to kindergarten. An inevitable note of sadness seeped into our joy. Blown by the winds of opportunity, our children are about to leave us. In a few months, they will no longer be living under our roofs.

On the early evening of the senior prom, our daughter gathered with other girls at a classmate's home to share the excitement of getting ready together. Some of the parents showed up to see the girls in their finery. After they had donned their long gowns and fixed their hair and put on their make-up, we all carefully climbed the wooden steps to the roof of our host's building.

Among the flowering plants of the rooftop garden, against the soaring city backdrop, under a changing sky of sun-masked clouds, the senior girls pose for their picture. The overcast light brings out the jewel-like shades of their gowns: turquoise, champagne, a rose-and-lime print, aqua, purple, velvety black, and pure white—seven girls in a row with their arms around each other. In the fall, they will be attending colleges in Connecticut, Oregon,

Pennsylvania, North Carolina, California, Massachusetts, and New Jersey, but before their lives veer off onto different paths, they band together for this celebration. They appear radiant with strength and beauty, shining with optimism. On the verge of departure, they are poised to surpass us, as we prepare to become less of what we are. And though we have anticipated it, we are not ready.

The changes of adulthood are slow, and the mill of time grinds exceedingly fine. Childhood is the opposite, and the older we grow, the faster the changes in the first part of life seem to occur.

In the beginning
she was flesh of my flesh.
All her growing was growing apart.

A multitude of children
have disappeared into the dark.

Sometimes I miss the feel
of her soft little hand in my palm,
four fingers curled around one of mine.

Her eyes alone unchanged from childhood—
their crystalline look of concentration,
one blue iris with a fleck of brown.

I never thought I'd have a child, but raising a daughter with my husband and participating in our child's life cycle have been the greatest joy and privilege of my life. My favorite saying about parenthood, one which comes to me often, is that parents must give their children roots and wings. Roots to ground them so that they will have the strength and fortitude to withstand adversity. And wings to fly away, to soar high, and go to places we never imagined. Soon my husband and I will face the reality of our empty nest. And while it is sad in a way to be left behind, it is also our wish come true.

Love is Not my Language

by M.D. Poole

These days, I take my hound dog on long walks to the Mediterranean Sea and listen to New York Yankees games through the computer. More importantly, I study French. After traipsing over the world for 58 years, I am now an ex-pat on the Cote d'Azur, writing stories, novels, ghost writings, blogs, and articles in English, while learning a new language.

I've had two divorces, not as many Elizabeth Taylor, but enough. After the first one, I cut off my hair and took two years of beginner's Spanish at the college level. Far from fluent, I felt a surge of power every time I spoke in Spanish to someone in New York's diverse community where I was living.

A few years later, after an idyllic trip to Paris with my son, I fell in love with the music of the French language. Back home, I took a beginner's French class, just for fun, just for revenge against my mother who told me when I was 12 that French would be too hard for me, that I should take Latin instead. All the other students, besides being 20 years younger than I, those "beginners" entered the class with 2 to 4 years of high school French. All I had was the experience of wearing lingerie, watching a Pas de Deux, and hearing Beausoleil play zydeco. However, when I made my final oral presentation, I demonstrated the tricks my two dogs could do with French commands. It was a hit, and I passed the course.

Then I married again. At the time, it seemed the right thing to do. However -- the inevitable "however" -- I divorced. Voila! Again, I cut my hair off! And again, I decided to pursue language learning. I understand cutting the hair. Remember the old song from South Pacific, "I'm going to wash that man right out of my hair, and send him on his way!" But what do you suppose it is, this connection between divorce and foreign language?

I wanted to be immersed in French, but moving to France was a challenge. Getting a long-term Visa required several visits to the French consulate, a large interview fee, and finally, piles of documentation about my health, my finances, and my purposes for moving, along with a variety of recommendations and testimonials. I was determined, as only a newly divorced person can be, and the French representatives were charming, until finally, months later, they attached to my US passport a lovely French Visa, with silver holograms and my smiling photograph.

I moved to the Riviera instead of Paris. After New York, I wanted warm. I also had the idea that Parisians talk too fast. Now that I've been here a year, I can tell you, I was wrong about that. The Parisians whom I've met enunciate beautifully, speaking "standard" French, the same language used by broadcast news people. Others have regional accents, which are harder for my untrained ear to grasp. It's similar to the US, where Nebraska and California have the all-American sound, but Mississippi and the Bronx barely share the same language.

The city of Nice became part of France only 150 years ago. It's nestled in the curve of the Bay of Angels, a 1/2 hour from Monaco and Italy, with the foothills of the Alps marching up to the sky from the coastline. Despite my previous classes, when I arrived at the Nice airport with 3 suitcases and 2 large dog crates, I couldn't understand a word being spoken.

Those first few weeks, I didn't have trouble finding my way around, getting set up with internet, ordering vegetarian meals, or meeting new friends, because as soon as anyone heard me stutter hello in French, they seamlessly switched to English, the international language. The downside of that, of course, is I was not forced to plunge into their language.

My best friend in Nice, a Brit who has lived here for 10 years, never sat in a French class, and she gabs away with native speakers quite easily. She gives credit to having listened to French television newscasts for the first year of her residency. It doesn't slow her down that she's only comfortable in the present tense, and she can mimic anything said to her.

Ah, we all learn in different ways. The way I've gone at this language acquisition thing, is to go to class. After I was settled in Nice, I registered for language classes at a private language school, 3 hours a day, 5 days a week, 24 weeks.

I've made progress since I arrived a year ago. I can't understand conversations between strangers on the bus, when I'm trying to eavesdrop, but I can understand a teacher speaking French. I have a broad vocabulary and a grasp of the language's grammar, though I am stuck for the moment with one, two, and three word questions and responses coming out of my mouth. Thoughts, grammar, and vocabulary haven't synchronized for me yet.

I have two friends in New York City who teach English-as-a-Second-Language to those who come to America's shores. They assure me that it is a seven year

process for an adult to become fluent in a language, if that person works hard at it continuously. That makes me feel a bit better.

I remember when I learned to drive a car. I couldn't understand how a person could do it all at once – checking the road, looking at the speedometer, keeping an eye on three rear-view mirrors, coordinating the gas pedal and brake pedal, while gauging the actions of all the cars circling around. I soon accomplished those driving activities simultaneously and automatically. I was much younger when I learned to drive, but I am guessing that the process of speaking French will be the same: at some point, I'll be able to do it all at once, thinking, speaking, analyzing, listening and understanding.

The thing I do quite well now is reading. I just finished reading Harry Potter in French. The back of the book says it's aimed at 10-year-olds, and I am quite impressed, both with them and with myself. Three hundred pages of sophisticated sentences! I've read Babe and Sherlock Holmes too. I fly through these books, not as quickly as if I were reading them in English, but nonetheless, with page-turning energy.

As a kid, I read a lot. In my family, speaking up wasn't encouraged, but I have a top-notch ability now with the English language, verbal and written. I attribute my skill to thousands of hours of reading for pleasure and escape. That process of learning English from the written word seems to be replicating itself as I learn French. I'm dramatically older and learn more slowly, with more distractions, but I hope I end up with the same result.

On the four-legged language stool – reading, listening, writing and speaking – the reading leg is sturdy for me, writing is average, and the other two will improve. I persevere, with only the occasional melt-down of courage. Now I'm taking French classes, 2 hours, 4 days a week, with older adults like myself. I also meet twice a week for an hour conversation with French friends -- well, their conversation, and my attempts at breaking through self-consciousness.

My dog, the sea, my work, a world of new friends who like my short hair, these things make France a good stop on my life map. Loving its language serves me better than the language of love.

In the Bathroom with Tom Hanks

by Mark Barkawitz

The stage play, “Rent,” had just opened at the Ahmanson Theatre in downtown Los Angeles. Neil Patrick Harris, aka 'Doogie Howser', was playing the lead and I was very fortunate to finagle two orchestra seats near the end of the fourth row as an anniversary present for my wife. We got all dressed up for the event, which turned out to be a special night for Hollywood celebs. Michael Richards, aka 'Kramer', was there in a cardigan sweater and brown slacks that looked as if he had borrowed them from the wardrobe department on “Seinfeld.” And Tom Hanks and his wife Rita Wilson were sitting fourth row center. Our row.

At the intermission, my wife and I got a drink in the lobby. As the crowd started to move back to their seats, I hurried to the nearby restroom. Inside, only one man stood at the urinals—the aforementioned Mr. Tom Hanks. I took my place at the opposite end of the row of urinals, unzipped, and without looking over, commented:

“I really liked your work as Buffy.”

He paused mid-stream, as if taken aback, before laughing. “Thanks a lot.” He zipped-up, washed-up, and headed out, still smiling, shaking his head, as if it had been a long time since he’d thought about his break-out, cross-dressing role in the early ’80s TV sitcom, “Bosom Buddies.”

Back in the lobby, I told my wife what had happened. Across the lobby, Tom was likewise talking to his wife Rita. Then he pointed me out to her and she smiled across the cavernous room. I smiled back.

Neil Patrick Harris and the play were great, too.

Lost and Found

by Beth McKim

Sometimes a single quick act can define a person. A friend recently told me a story about a young woman named Anne, who had the difficult task of leaving Paris, many years ago, after a magical week of visiting a wealthy Parisian cousin.

Still exulting in every moment of royally dining in Café Verlet, sipping beaujolais at Le Rubes, and being transformed at the Paris Opera House by the

world of Carmen, Anne ran to the Gare du Nord station to catch the train which was to whisk her from Paris to Amsterdam for her eventual return home.

She carried her rather large floral suitcase, a black floppy hat with a wide brim, her gray and black Herringbone coat, a bag of last minute souvenirs for nieces and nephews, and her most prized personal souvenir of Paris, a pair of silver indigo gloves made of lamb leather. They were lined with cashmere and had fox fur trim. She treasured the gloves even more because she had worn them night and day, whenever she desired to look stylishly French, and they looked perfect with every outfit. Anne had paid almost as much for the gloves as she had paid for her trip and planned to treasure their beauty and the memories they would bring forever.

She climbed onto the train with no time to spare, quickly making her way to her seat. Having placed her bag with the conductor, Anne stowed her purse, hat, and coat above where she would sit and took her seat next to the window, still clutching her gloves.

As the train began to pull out of the station, she gazed out the window and her eyes went straight to a sight she would not soon forget. One of the beautiful gloves was lying on the platform. In a split second, before it was too late, Anne opened the window and tossed out the other one, watching it land in close proximity to its mate.

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