The Pumpkin
Helen Walker Webb

I first noticed the pumpkin early this spring when I discovered the flat parking lot close to the building in which I live. Located between two apartment buildings and used by only a few residents, it is a great place to begin my morning walk. In addition to the sidewalks around the parking area, there are two long walks to seldom used doors. The trees are full of birds. Chipmunks and squirrels scamper across the well-maintained green grass. The residents have made the area their own with various bird feeders, bird houses, a bird bath, and large containers of flowers, rose bushes, and even tomato plants. There is always something different to see and watch.

I had walked the lot several times before I noticed the deep orange, almost brown pumpkin. It was located in a corner of my building surrounded by pine needles and behind some small shrubs. The slightly curved stem made it perfect for a fall front porch decoration. I kept wondering who would have put a ceramic pumpkin in such a remote place. A ceramic rabbit does adorn a nearby doorway, as does a Christmas poinsettia.

After weeks of walking by and watching the pumpkin, I walked across the grass and thumped it lightly. Nothing happened. I did not want to hit it hard. If it was real it would be rotten and squash all over the place; if ceramic, it would break. So, I let it be and continued to watch.

Several weeks later the stem was not as high above the pine needles as it had been. The next week it was lower in the pine needles, but perfectly shaped. Gradually it got lower and lower, then it just sunk into the ground. The top and stem perfectly shaped.
June fifth I walked over the grass to take a closer look. The top had cracked a bit but the stem stood tall, perfectly shaped. The pumpkin was just below the pine needles. It must have rotted all the way from the bottom up with the seeds now deep in the ground.

I wonder if there will be a pumpkin crop this fall in time for Halloween. I’ll keep watching and wondering.
When I was a kid in the third grade around 1943, I lay on the grass and squinted my eyes and saw tiny entities (not what we would call “floaters”) and went to tell my dad that I could see gravity. He assured me that gravity is invisible. I was interested in being a scientist, but apparently I was not serious about it, because I never took a course in physics or astronomy and only the basic chemistry and biology courses that were required in high school and college.

And yet I have always had an interest in the stars and the universe and how we human beings got here. Finally, many years after college, at age 51 I took a course at Wake Forest University on “The Universe of Modern Science,” taught by a distinguished professor. He opened my mind to the power of Big Bang that occurred some 14 billion years ago and in a tiny fraction of a second, hurled all that is out, up, down, everywhere. Hydrogen was the main ingredient, which eventually formed helium and then through the huge clouds of these basic gases, stars were born over billions of years. Gravity pulled these gases together with tremendous pressure so that the stars are essentially furnaces of nuclear fusion burning hydrogen into helium. They don’t burn up as we think of burning. They keep doing the fusion process which keeps them stable and burning for billions of years.

From those stars, some of which were called supernovas, explosions and shock waves caused molecular clouds to collapse under their own gravity to create a new generation of stars. The sun, our star, is one of these newcomers. It is some 4.7 billion years old and will continue to shine for another 5 billion years. In this astoundingly immense process of star-making, other chemicals like iron and various heavy metals came forth. The gasses that brought our star into being also created planets going around our sun, what we call the solar system.

Our particular planet that we call earth (or more recently, the “blue planet”) is at just the right distance from the sun (93 million miles away) so that we have suitable temperatures, oceans, rain, oxygen, carbon, vegetation, and various minerals and chemicals so that all creatures, including us, have what we need to sustain life. We even have a moon that has been rotating around us for almost as long as the earth’s been here. It has a role besides its romantic
beauty. It controls tides. Some scientists believe the ocean tides created lagoons or pools of water that may have been the source for single cells of living matter to arise. But we do not yet know how life began, how inanimate material could jump from heat and chemical reactions to give use life, which is the ability of cells to replicate themselves, multiply, and be the source of all creatures, large and small. (Scientists speculate that life may have come from electrical shock, clay, deep sea vents, ice or meteorites.) How the millions of species of plants, insects and animals evolved and adapted to their environments is a study in itself.

Actually, we are very isolated on earth. We can only see about 2,000 to 3,000 stars with our naked eye on a clear night. They seem close to us, but they aren’t. If, for example, we reduced our sun, which is 864,000 miles in diameter, to the size of a pea, at that scale, the next closest star, Alpha Centauri, would be 90 miles away. Again, it takes the sun’s light 8.3 minutes to get to earth, and during each second of those few minutes the light travels 186,746 miles, which would be like us going around the earth seven times real, real, real fast!

Ninety-three million miles to the sun is almost nothing when we realize our sun is some 27,200 light years (not hours or weeks or decades or centuries) distant from the center of our galaxy, the Milky Way. And in the Milky Way there are at least 400 billion stars. They are well separated in space, but because there are so many, our galaxy looks like a cloud of spilled milk. Added to all that, scientists believe there are not millions, but 170 billion galaxies. They have various shapes and have anywhere from one trillion to 100 trillion stars in them! Such numbers and such distances are beyond my comprehension and probably the comprehension of most people. In recent years, for example, the Hubble telescope has detected the light coming from galaxies that were created billions of years ago, at the far edges of space, and whose light has taken all that time to reach us.

In addition, to all of these discoveries, we are finding evidence of black holes, quasars, megastars, dark energy, and dark matter. Apparently dark energy and dark matter make up some 92% of all that there is, and the material stuff of suns and planets and asteroids are just 8%. Maybe we think we are “something special,” the way people in earlier centuries believed the earth was the center of the solar system, but when we consider the vastness of the creation, we are humbled. That does not mean we aren’t the focal point of God’s work. It just means we are given the wonderfully wide-ranging lives with minds that can imagine things, reflect on our own
existence, remember the past, plan for the future, and explore and discover aspects of the creation, and develop many tools for numerous projects and purposes.

Later in the class, the professor turned our attention to the little things, the tiny particles that function to make our life possible. The study of these particles and of atoms is known as quantum mechanics, and the researchers with their electron microscopes and accelerators like the Hadron Collider (CERN in Geneva) work to figure out how we move and have our being. They use a number of words or names to describe these particles that spin and somehow function within the laws of the electro-magnetic field, the weak force, the strong force, and gravity. Physicists believe they are getting close to finding the smallest possible entity (called a “vibrating string”) that undergirds everything that exists. To get to that, they believe there are some eleven additional dimensions beyond the three that we know. If this works out, we could have what is called the Unified Field Theory.

When we consider how many cells are in our bodies, we have to marvel. Studies indicate that each of us has between 30 to 70 trillion cells: 50 billion fat cells, 2 billion heart muscle cells, and 20 to 30 trillion red blood cells! It seems there is a microscopic universe within us similar to the big one in the sky! The amazing thing is that we are composed of four basic amino acids: adenine, cytosine, quinine, and thymine, known as A, C, G, and T arranged in what is called a Genetic Code with sequences that make up the variety of persons or creatures that we are, depending on the way they are arranged. There is more to us than that, but these and other amino acids and proteins work to shape us into the unique individuals that we are. Moreover, the cells in our bodies know what they are to do instinctively, so that our bodies send T-cells and white blood cells to fight diseases and heal wounds. They go to work without any of us asking them to! In addition, and thankfully, we have developed vaccines to help build up anti-bodies to assist in our defense from infections like the COVID-19 virus.

I want to add to these statements by saying that I am a minister and have studied the Bible. When I realized that the Bible is not a science book, it helped me put the big questions about creation and our history as humans in a more understandable perspective. Essentially, the Bible is a book of faith that tells us who created everything out of nothingness or chaos, who we are as persons who can relate to the Creator, and what we ought to be doing not only to love and trust God, but to love one another, and be stewards of the earth or what we call the environment these days.
Biblical writers basically testified to what they saw: the glory of the sun, moon, and stars. In Psalm 8, the psalmist was filled with awe when he realized that we have special status within the creation, just a little lower than angels. When we read Psalm 139, we find a writer who knows that God knows all about him, how he was woven together in his mother’s womb and what he is thinking, when he lies down and rises, and confesses that there is nowhere he can go in the world and escape from God’s presence. In other words, these writers knew God created and cared about them, even if they did not know about amino acids, genes, chromosomes, stem cells and other details of their existence.

At a certain time in human history, around 2,000 B.C.E, the Creator, name Yahweh, called a man named Abram, a wandering Aramean, and promised to give him many, many descendants. To prove his point, he brought Abram outside one night and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them … So shall your descendants be.” (Genesis 15:5-6)

What has been revealed to the persons and writers of the Bible is that the Creator is involved with us and has done what is necessary to redeem us from our rebellion against God and God’s insistence that we love and trust God exclusively. Worship of idols is forbidden. And we are to love one another through obedience to the laws and commandments for peaceful community life, expressed in the Ten Commandments, for example.

So far as we know, the claim that God said, “Let there be light,” to command the creation to come about, is unique compared to the other creation stories of the Middle East, such as the Gilgamesh Epic of the Mesopotamians. There is no explanation of how all things came into being other than by God’s desire to bring order out of chaos or out of nothingness. The writer simply says it took six days for the various ingredients of earthly life to come into being.

The other creation story in Genesis depicts God as much more involved with making humans out of the clay of the ground. God breathes into us and gives us breath and life, and then goes on to deal with our disobedience. There is no mention of how long ago this took place, only that God did it. Researchers today believe that we human beings gained cognitive skills around 70,000 years ago and then went from hunting and gathering to agriculture and more recently to our technological stage. The ongoing search for proof about how we became the persons we are does not diminish the mystery of a creator causing it. The Bible testifies to what we call a
response of faith, of believing that God brought everything into being. What researchers discover and explain only enriches out biblical faith.

The main thing I learn from the details of creation is that scientists, astrophysicists, and anthropologists describe that there is even more to appreciate about what God has wrought. Each new discovery brings another “Wow” to our lips. I do wonder, of course, what God was doing during all those billions of years. When I think about that, I realize that my concept of God is limited by my ways of thinking and doing in my little life. If I were God, why would I wait around all that time before getting involved with Abram and his followers? There were plenty around in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. So why should a small group of wandering herdsmen be chosen? One biblical writer, Isaiah, in 55:8, notes that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts and leaves it at that. And in Psalm 90:4 we read that a thousand years in God’s sight are like a day gone by or a watch in the night. We are very different, and we experience time very differently and don’t have the ingenuity or power to create those massive galaxies and the forces that make everything function. And Job, who loses his family and then is affected with painful sores, gets no answer from God about why he (or we) suffers. God simply says, “Where were you when I brought this creation and these creatures into being?” In other words, God is saying, “I don’t have to explain what or why I do what I do!”

Another thought I have is that all the universe, the stars and galaxies that we see, are but a wondrous backdrop for us to enjoy and ponder. Does that make sense, or is there more to it than that? I love the thoughts, the discoveries, the efforts by Einstein and other brilliant persons to come up with a view of God as One who doesn’t play dice, that there are mathematical formulas to explain how the whole thing works. Others, like Heidegger, speak of an “uncertainty principle” that says sometimes atoms don’t do what they are supposed to do - at least according to our everyday ideas - and no one knows why or when that happens. He hints at the improbability of the universe. Will the universe expand forever or revert and implode? There are many questions to ponder.

I’d still like to know more about that gravity I thought I saw years ago. Einstein says that space is curved and that gravity causes that. Did gravity, then, cause my thoughts “to fall” into my small mind all those years ago? Maybe. Maybe not. I mean, who knows? Sometimes insights come to us “out of the blue,” and who knows why such things happen?
Even to be able to ask that question and many others about the creation large and small makes us realize that we are part of an amazing, unexplainable gift: that of consciousness. We are conscious beings who are aware of our existence and can puzzle over some of the things I have described. Where did that ability come from?

A theologian named Rudolf Otto, in his book, *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), tried to describe God with words like “the numinous” and, “mysterium tremendum.” I think that word “mysterium” is a pretty good word for us to keep in mind. Or, at least, it is a valid starting point.
Life has recently presented me with a daunting task. Something very important to my survival lies broken in my path. Revealing the urgent need for healing of a most essential part—now lying limp and utterly useless. It simply will not start. All due to a sudden shocking crash when I hit a bump that felt like a stump and ended up in a surprised broken disgruntled lump on the very hard floor - need I say more?

My trusty right appendage that in the past has been quite busy feeding, bathing, dressing me, can no longer carry its load. It seems we don’t honor and respect the great gifts of our body until we suffer their loss. Then it’s the shock of your life! You toss and turn internally, you’re ready to crash and burn.

Now the mounting strife presents a boulder-sized rock in the road. At this point and juncture the $1000 question raises its ugly head. Do you have what it takes to crawl, walk, climb, and jump over that blinding large obstacle left in your path?

Now comes the real test of you mentally, as you begin to pedal on the most tedious healing journey of your life-with no roadmap. It’s then the expertise of my Legacy therapy buddies step in and I’m already feeling the sweet smell of success welling up in my chest. For I will know what can ensue, who because of their smarts, they work their awesome redesign and realignment magic on you.

Now at last I’m feeling up to the task. The time has now come to be my own “cheerleader.” And I would definitely prefer never to hear or even think about the old Elvis refrain, “Return to Sender.” Because she’s had a fender bender and her old jalopy will never be the same again.

Absolutely not! Instead, I’d rather resort to my high school football chant: “Go, Greyhounds, and fight, fight, fight!” I’ll take that to heart and think it’s a good start toward oiling my gears and mending my part.

Because of, in spite of, and regardless of my 94 years. Cheers!
LIFE EXPERIENCE
When Life gives you Lemons

Charles Swanson

My attention wandered in and out of the game. It was the last game of the ill-fated Cannon Cubs who had a perfect season of 0-12. Ty Cobb had died earlier in the year and I had informed the team of his tenacity and grit and his amazing run as a baseball player. Whatever else could be said of Cobb, no one could deny he was a very good baseball player. So in his honor, I asked them to come to our last game with polished shoes. And, lo and behold, they did!

Back to the game. It was the last inning with no one on base and two out. Eddie Kissell was at bat, Eddie was my catcher. In little league all the catcher has to do (or had to do) is catch the ball (or retrieve a ball that had gone all the way to the backstop) and throw it back to the pitcher. Anything else the catcher could do was gravy.

Eddie was towheaded and a genuinely nice kid: well mannered, polite, and always trying to please. He was good at his assigned position and caught the ball with regularity. He wasn't exceptional, but he was the best I had and he showed up for practices and games. Batting, of course, is required of all players in a baseball game or at least it was before “they” decided pitchers didn't need to bat. Anyhow, in 1961 Little League rules were pretty much the same as the big leagues; all players in the game had to bat. In spite of Eddie's other qualities, hitting a baseball that was thrown at him at the blinding speed of 35 mph had him flummoxed. He'd begin with a good stance and fierce glare at the pitcher, but when the ball came to the plate Eddie was usually nowhere to be found. In baseball parlance he “stepped in the bucket” and bailed. If Eddie made contact with the ball, it usually came to naught. Anyhow, this was the last game and Eddie hadn't gotten a hit. I yelled encouragement from the dugout, as if the World Series were on the line, “Eddie hit one for Ty.”

As I said above, I was giving the game only partial attention when, to my utter astonishment, Eddie dribbled the ball right up the middle and he trotted down to first base with a big grin on his face as if he had just slugged a home run and won the World Series. I can't attest if Eddie's eyes were open or shut when he hit that ball, but I know mine were open. I shall never forget that hit. His own father couldn't have been more proud of his success. A dinky little single, but piled together with a season of failures (outs), this was nothing short of a miracle!

After the game, I bought all the boys a cold soft drink and talked about the season just concluded and where we would all go from here. Everyone said goodbye and in a terse bittersweet moment, we parted company, never again to come together to experience the joys of our great American Pastime. I told the boys to watch the mail for I had promised each youngster a penny postcard from Chicago, home of the real major league Cubs.

When our season began in April, I could never have imagined I would be deeply involved in coaching (which was actually a form of teaching) baseball to a dozen prepubescent boys at an Air Force Base in Clovis, New Mexico. I think Forest Gump captured it best when he said, “Life is like a box of chocolates ... you never know what you're gonna get.” And that certainly applies to me and my life. I have sampled so many, many chocolates and found so many interesting and
rewarding “flavors” in my peripatetic travels around the United States and the world.

I enlisted in the Air Force in the fall of 1960 and, as a newly-minted high school graduate, was assigned a permanent billet almost 1,300 miles from home on land the Spanish had dubbed, the *Llano Estacado*: “staked plains.” I grew up on the outskirts of Chicago and found the Llano one awful place to be. The topography was terribly bleak, supporting such unaccustomed flora as sage brush and tumbleweeds. On maps, the kind gas stations provided for free, a copse of a dozen trees or so would be classed as a "forest."

Every spring there were dust storms that would spring up out of nowhere and half of Arizona would blow through and leave a rich blanket of red dirt on the base and in the hospital where I worked. I wasn't so much “stationed” in this rather bleak environment as I was “stuck!” I was stuck half a continent away from my girlfriend at the time, in the middle of nowhere. The Air Force had seen fit to deposit me directly after military training, bootcamp, at Cannon AFB and skip any technical school altogether to participate in something called OJT (on the job training). I was never sure whether they thought I was so bright I could omit formal schooling to become a medical corpsman or simply too dumb. I never asked.

Just about the time the Little League opportunity showed up, I received a “Dear John” letter from that girl back home. The “letter” was a ubiquitous event in the lives of young men in the military; almost a rite de passage, a life milestone that said to the recipient: “Welcome to the grown-up world ... you have just been dumped.”

At eighteen I had a perfectly good reason to enlist in the service: *Elvis Presley*. No, we weren't in vocal competition or anything like that. In my mind it was a brutal calculus: enlist or get drafted. The reasoning was straightforward, “*If they'll draft Elvis, sooner or later they will draft you.*” All young men were subject to “Selective Service,” except those with medical conditions such as bone spurs, until they were 26. I don't mind saying that the distance between 18 and 26 seemed like a temporal eternity. The view of myself and my friends was simple: enlist and get it over with - something like taking a bitter pill. And, after all, we weren't at war. So, at the time of my enlistment, college was not even in or on my mind. Oh, sure, I could spell the word and driven by one a time or two in the past, but actually attending one? Besides, even if I had decided to pursue higher education, there was no money in my family for such an undertaking and extravagance.

Whenever someone in the military moves to a new base (a PCS, permanent change of station) you are required to “clear in.” You make a number of obligatory visits to various designated “stops” on the base, e.g., the hospital, the chaplain's office, and the education office. The last one turned out to be one of my first lemons and first opportunity to make some lemonade.

I was advised by the administrative clerk that there were four tests in various (academic) areas and I could earn college credit for each test I passed. Being competitive at heart, I went ahead and took all four. For my efforts I was awarded 24 college credits by the United States Air Force Institute. I hadn't been in the military six months and I already had a half year of college!

Cannon also had a liaison with a local university and various professors commuted to the base in the evening to teach college courses to base personnel. As fate would have it, within two
months of arriving on base, I was taking my first sit-down college course: An Introduction to Psychology. To me, college seemed like a different world; one I enjoyed very much. By May I had earned my first college level credits. I took evening classes off and on for four years and with tests (credits) and earned credits from classes, I accumulated 56 credit hours - almost two years of college by the time I was discharged four years later. And, yes, while I was earning these credits, I still managed to coach Little League.

Ah, yes, the Little League ... like a gift that arrived at just the right time in my life. Something to take my mind off my erstwhile romance. I became acquainted with a married couple who lived on the base and had an 11-year-old son, Ben. As we were chatting, I became aware of Ben's involvement in Cannon's Little League program and I was invited to "come out and help one of the managers." I had always loved and played baseball and this lemonade opportunity simply fell in my lap. I was assigned to help master sergeant, Roman Pilsudski. This was fortunate for me, since Sgt. Pilsudski had received transfer orders and would soon be leaving the base. When he left, an opening occurred for the team's manager. When the powers that be asked if I would like the job, I said "Yes."

Cannon had four Little League teams for our intra-league competition. How and who selected the teams was never clear to me, but it became obvious to me after watching actual play that the team I was assigned could best be described as the "left over" boys when the teams were formed. (None of the three other teams lost as many games as the Cubs did in 1961.) Oh, they were good kids, but in the parlance of today, they were the boys that lacked certain baseball playing skills and they were all placed on a single team. They required a good deal of coaching to get them up to speed and to be able to play a competitive game. I looked at the whole thing as a challenge and I was going to have to play with the hand I had been dealt. And, goodness knows, I had the time on my hands.

Once the season got underway, I met with the boys, assessed their individual talents, and began workouts and teaching the fundamentals of baseball. What I needed most was a pitcher: a boy who could get the ball over the plate with consistency; two boys would be a Godsend. In Little League, the team’s catcher is more like a backstop since there is no “stealing” of bases. The job of catching was given to Eddie Kissel. The shortstop was next to be filled with Trooper Carlson. He could throw the farthest. Once I had the “first string” infielders selected, the remainder of the boys filled in whenever and wherever they were needed. Then with the help of the boys, we picked our name. Since the National League Chicago Cubs were having some playing challenges, in 1961 the Cubs dispensed with a manager altogether in lieu of six co-equal coaches who ran the team. I think Mr. Wrigley, owner of the Cubs, was subscribing to the notion that six heads would be better than one and thereby produce more positive results, such as winning the pennant. While the arrangement didn't work for Mr. Wrigley, it did at least give us a novel suggestion for a team name: the "Cubs." And, since we were located at Cannon AFB, "Cannon" as a prefix seemed natural; hence, we became the “Cannon Cubs.”

We would practice almost every day for a couple hours without harvesting that elusive "win." We would play a game; we would lose a game; and we'd practice some more. It was all for naught. Over the course of the season, we had played some very good games and came very, very close to winning without tasting victory. The parents didn't seem to mind that I would have
the team out for practice almost every day. After all, it was summer and mom could always count
on her 11-year-old son having something to do (and be out of the house and her hair).

I stayed with Little League at Cannon for all four years of my enlistment. By the second
year I learned how to select a team and the won-lost record of each of my teams gradually
improved. The team record that second year was more acceptable and by the fourth year of
managing a team, we took the brass ring: we won the base championship. I managed the base
All-Star team for the Little League regional playoffs in Clovis, New Mexico.

All the attention I was giving my teams did not go unnoticed by the parents. They also saw
my transportation situation - or lack thereof. I would simply throw the laundry bag filled with
balls and bats over my shoulder and walk. I toted the bag everywhere on the base and never
complained. Sometime during the middle part of the second year, I was called by my second
baseman's father, Major Mead, and was asked to meet him at the field at 1700 hrs. When I
arrived, I was met by most of the team and advised that the parents were aware of my
commitment to the boys, the game of baseball and my lack of transportation. The decision was
made by one of the parents to do something about it. They all chipped in and bought me a car! I
was handed (presented) the keys to a brown 1949 Ford. I had seen the car driven on the base by
a test pilot. It would be easy to distinguish the pilot from an airman (me). He was completely
glabrous with a shiny pate and I had a mop of hair. Me? A car? This token of appreciation was
truly a chilled glass of sweet lemonade; I never forgot the generosity of the parents.

A couple of weeks after the Cannon Cubs' last game, the base held a beauty contest of
sorts among the 14 Squadrons. The winner of the contest would represent the base in some
charity event. The hospital squadron had many nurses and the staff chose 2nd. Lt. Eleanor
Williams as its representative. What was needed was a way to raise money for Lt. Williams and,
hence, the charity. Not missing an opportunity to assist, I proposed that a softball game be held
between the nurses and the Cannon Cubs with a modest admission fee charged to raise money
for the charity. The Hospital Commander, Lt. Col. Rudolph, was the games' umpire and called
balls and strikes - sorta.

The rules were loosely followed and a good time was had by all. This game was the only
game the Cannon Cubs won that year and the game only counted in the hearts the boys. (Lt.
Williams came in second place out of 14 Squadrons that had entered in the contest.)

As the twilight fell on my Air Force career, I looked back over my many experiences and
accomplishments I had, realizing that none of them would have come to pass if I had not been
stationed at Cannon and become involved with Little League baseball. I began my Air Force
career grudgingly, not really wanting to go in the service, any service. However, with hindsight, I
could see how much I really needed the structure and discipline the service afforded me. I also
realized that taking advantage of the sundry opportunities (lemons) I was given, my life was
enriched (lemonade) beyond measure. This includes my "discovery" of college.

While my college education began at Cannon, it didn't culminate until a couple of
decades later with the award of an associate degree in science. (My four prior degrees: B.S.,
M.S., M.A., and Ph.D. were earned earlier and elsewhere.)

I never forgot my Little League boys and found one of them, Danny Kruzel, decades
later through the internet. Sadly, he informed me that one of my favorite players from the 1964
team (and his childhood best friend) and a youngster with an exceptional future ahead of him, Edward "Chico" Levell, Jr., was killed in a freak accident while he was a cadet flight instructor at the USAF Academy. The news I received was decades old, but when I learned of Chico's death, I mourned as if it happened yesterday. Sometimes, I guess lemons can also yield up a very sour drink that all of us at one time or another have had to sip ... like it or not.

While I searched, I was never able to find my Eddie Kissel. I did find a dentist with the same name, but to no avail. My forays into the past notwithstanding,

I have a feeling the towheaded boy who got his first hit at his last at bat did okay in life, just not as a catcher.
My Track and Field Experience
Bill Gramley

When I was in the seventh grade, I saw some guys throwing the shot put at a nearby high school. Shortly after that, Skip Waldron and I found a roundish rock at a construction site near my home and we threw it in imitation of the shot putters I had seen.

When I was in the eleventh grade at R.J. Reynolds High School in Winston-Salem, NC, I decided to go out for track and throw the shot put. Coach John Tandy had thrown it in college and showed us how to throw. He encouraged me and said to keep throwing and I’d soon get to 45 feet. At the end of the season at the state championship, I beat Ronnie “Monk” Falls, a senior at High Point Central, with a distance of 47 feet. Nice surprise!

A few days later our head track coach, Mr. Philo, handed me a discus and told me to take it home and learn to throw it. No other instructions. I had seen some guys throwing it, but I had not tried it. That summer I taught myself how to hold it and throw it on the field hockey field on the Salem College campus, where we lived.

My senior year on the track team I did both the shot put and the discus. At the state championships in Chapel Hill, I broke the state record in the shot put, which was 52’ 3” with a throw of 52’ 5” or so, but Don Denning from Durham beat me with a throw of nearly 53 feet. Don had won the discus the year before, but when we did the discus, I set a new state record of 150’ 10” and won over him. We ended up in a 28-28 tie with Durham, since we had some good runners as well as throwers.

At Davidson College we were in the Southern Conference and competed against schools like Richmond, William and Mary, V.M.I., V.P.I. (Virginia Tech these days) and some others. I don’t recall how I did on the freshman team, but as a sophomore I placed second in the shot and discus, and then as a junior and senior I won both titles. My brother Digs was a year behind me and a left-hander with a good baseball pitching arm. We were first and second in the discus my junior and senior years at the Conference championship. I didn’t pay much attention to it, but I had broken the Davidson College school record in the discus my junior year at 146’ or so and that lasted for 50 years. That’s hard to believe because we did no weight or strength training. One day during my senior year, however, I did ask Coach Heath Whittle how I could gain strength. He said to go into the gym and get on the parallel bars and do some dips. I did three and said, “That’s enough of that.”

So that was that until I was 62 and found out about Senior Games. I was pleased to know they had track and field and in 1997 I began to participate with the Piedmont Plus district in Winston-Salem. I had to find out what weight shot put and discus we were to throw. After age 60, the discus is one kilogram or 2.2 pounds and that seemed fair since we don’t have the strength we used to have. The shot put is also of lesser weight than it was in high school and college, and we compete in five-year groups, like 60-64, 65-69 and so forth.

If you place in the top three in your events, you qualify to participate in the State Finals, which are for all qualifiers in North Carolina. If you qualify there, you can go to the National Championships, which are held every other year at different cities. I went to my first Nationals in Orlando in 1999 and
found out there are a bunch of guys there better than me. I didn’t even make the finals (the top 10) in the shot put, but I did get 6th place in the discus.

Since then, I have gone to Nationals in Norfolk, Pittsburgh, Louisville, Palo Alto, Cleveland, Minneapolis, Birmingham, and Albuquerque. I wouldn’t have visited these places otherwise, and I got to know a lot of competitors over the years. I have thrown against former Olympians and watched their technique, hoping to imitate them, but not beat them.

I won my first Senior Games national championship in 2007 in the discus throw in Louisville when I was 72. It felt good. Ultimately, we try to do our personal best. This sport, as with everything else in life, is always a matter of self-testing.

Around 1999 I got re-acquainted with Gerry Vaughn, a shot and discus thrower I competed against when he was at Richmond University. He lives in Charlotte and over the years, especially when he was in the 65-69 age group, he broke numerous shot-put records nationally and beyond. He could throw the shot over 50 feet! I’ve never come close to him. And so far as records go, I did break the American indoor weight throw record at age 80 at 46’ 5”. I had learned to throw this implement when I was about 65. And the hammer as well. I especially like the hammer because it makes me feel as though I am back in the Middle Ages hurling it at a castle! (The hammer is a steel ball attached to a swivel and a long wire with a handle at the end where you hold the implement and then spin in a circle to throw it. The weight is the same except the handle is very close to the ball itself.)

I have carried my discus when I travel, even to Europe, to visit my daughter in Switzerland and my brother in Germany so I can practice and prepare for upcoming track meets at home. I have had fun with their children as I show them how to throw.

My dad used to say, as many others have said, that you can play golf or tennis well into your older years. I agree, but I can add that track and field has no age limits either! In recent years I have volunteered as a ‘throwers coach’ at Forsyth County Day School, about five miles from my home in Lewisville. These high school guys and gals learn and do well. One of the guys and one of the girls broke their school records in the shot and discus. I mostly show them some basics and encourage them.

In addition to my throwing, I have done race walking, the 100-meter dash, high jump, broad jump, long jump, and more recently the power walk, which is not as rigid in technique as the race walk. I don’t do all of those events any more due to hip limitations, which means I can’t push up to jump or push across the shot-put circle and so forth. I can stand and throw.

I am very grateful that Senior Games and National Masters Track provides all of this for men and women. Masters Track is an organization like Senior Games. They have regional as well as national championships indoors and outdoors each year. I have gone to many of these and added to the states and cities I have visited. At the most recent one at Iowa State in July, 2019 (before COVID epidemic called a halt to such gatherings), I won the discus title, beating a fellow who had always beaten me prior to that.

Since 2005 I have coordinated “throwers meets” at Hanes Park in Winston-Salem on some Saturdays during the summer. Usually ten or more throwers, men and women, came from Tennessee, South Carolina, Charlotte, Raleigh, Greensboro, and Asheville. This is good practice to prepare for official meets. We kid each other, laugh a lot, and enjoy the fellowship. And the best thing about it is the
shade tree next to the shot put circle, an oasis against the high humidity during the three or four hours we are out there.

We usually ‘run out of gas,’ as it were, but our love of throwing makes it worthwhile.
Nancy and I were sitting on the uneven, pebble ridden floor of a cave with our backs against the smooth, rippling-faced gray wall surface. It was early August 1972, and we were high up in the Himalayan chain of mountains in Kashmir. At about 12,000 feet elevation, our breathing was somewhat labored.

The cave was used often as a resting place for Hindu devotees on pilgrimage. They worshipped at the most sacred Shiv Lingam made of continuously dripping water which had frozen, forming a large stalagmite ice structure not more than 1 ½ miles from where we sat.

We were too tired to trek the last distance in order to see the sacred site, but my husband, Peter, and Nancy’s boyfriend, Mark, had previously decided to go on without us. The four of us had agreed that Nancy and I would start the long hike back to our campsite, which was 12 miles up and down, mostly descending, no later than 3 p.m. that afternoon. We hadn’t taken flashlights and didn’t want to get stuck on the rubble strewn trail with no light.

I looked at my watch. It was 3:20. “We can’t wait any longer. Do you think we’d better leave now?” I questioned, with concern in my voice.

“I think we should,” Nancy agreed. So we got up, brushed the dust from our jeans, took a drink from our canteens, and headed toward the mouth of the cave without the men. Focus and determination showed on our faces since we had to return before sundown.

As we left the cool dimness, we noticed that the sun was no longer high in the sky. There were some puffy clouds, very still, in the clear blue. No pollution up here! We followed the path which skirted a sometimes rushing, roaring river with many twists and turns around high outcroppings of rock. Here, high above the tree line, the only growing plants were scruffy-looking, brown bushes and shrubs.

We had to circumvent boulders, jump from rock to rock, squeeze between or scramble over them. It was scary. It was steep.

After about two hours of concentrated walking, being careful not to turn an ankle, we’d descended several thousand feet. Around the next bend, we entered a widening plateau where the river spread out into many gurgling streamlets intermingling amongst patches of luscious green grass. I felt an immense relief and a huge smile spread across my face. My eyes opened wide, taking in this new color pallet. The contrast from harsh, gray stone, to vivid succulence and calm, meandering streams, was like being in the City of Oz. I wanted to fling myself down onto the lusciousness and feel the tender new grass soft against my checks, desiring to drink from one of the pristine rivulets.

No time to waste! We had to keep moving! I started running, leaping over rocks, abandoning my previous fears! As we ran, we passed a herd of sheep with newborn lambs on wobbly legs. There were no shepherds to be seen!

I was overwhelmed by a sense of elation. With my hair flying loosely and the cooling breeze on my face, I felt like I had wings. The majestic, over-powering grandeur of the tall peaks surrounding me, combined with the sense of complete escape, total release, was new. I embraced it all.

I heard joyous laughter come from deep within. Jubilant. Rejoicing. I was free, free, free.
One Kid’s Foibles and Fiascos

Peter Venable

As a kid, we had a mutt named “Butchie Boo Boo” and a cat, “Kitty.” In the early ‘50s, we lived in Wyncote, Pennsylvania, near plots of woods. Kitty would often go on hunting expeditions. He was as proficient as those carnivores on Animal Planet, and would carry his game to the door, often in various stages of disembowelment (and occasionally decapitation). Those pathetic rabbits looked at us for mercy with their bunny eyes, and made hideous cries. Mom’s face would pale into cadaverous shades. I never knew what they did with those wretched creatures, as I was always ordered to go to my room.

One winter afternoon, I left the front door cracked open, rushed outside to play in the snow. The next evening during dinner, we noticed a faint unpleasant odor that wafted among the aroma of mom’s pot roast. It ceased after they lit their after-dinner cigarettes. Nevertheless, at breakfast the malodorous odor returned.

“What the hell is that smell?” dad asked as I slurped my cereal.

“Don’t ask me. I keep this place clean,” mom retorted, somewhat indignantly.

She took affront, as she was a meticulous housekeeper.

That night we were eating liver, a meal I detested and to matters worse, it was cooked with onions. (I would have preferred one of kitty’s delicacies.) As I had to force down a few bites of the liver, I suppressed nausea. In our house, it was obligatory to eat “a few bites.” As usual, I had to endure one of dad’s famous “tongue-lashings” about how the poor would be grateful for such a banquet of liver, onions, and canned peas. I reasoned that if this were their permanent diet, there would cease to be any poor.

After dinner, mom opened the cellar door, and gasped.

“Ugh, what is that horrible stench? Paul, come here quick!”

At the stairwell, a foul odor caused our eyes to water. Down into the cellar, we searched around the furnace, then stepped into the bathroom. As we neared a radiator, the rank smell increased to lethal degrees. Dad looked behind it, and exclaimed “Good god Miss Agnes. There’s a damn dead rabbit here!”

Kitty hid it there, wounded and probably alive, and it died a grisly death if there ever was one. The hapless animal, wedged, broiled by the radiator. Within a few days, Kitty mysteriously vanished. Dad told us that he probably ran away to hunt rabbits. I never caught the coincidence of his disappearance.

The ultimate in our family outings: Visiting the Philadelphia Zoo. On this particular Saturday, we went to the zoo on a sweltering August day. Dad wore a short-sleeved shirt, ridiculous Bermuda shorts, black socks and shoes. In those days, the elephants were separated from people by a wall only some six feet high, and they stood next to it, begging for food with extended trunks. In all of nature, what is more mysterious than an elephant’s trunk? To a six year old, it had a life of its own, swaying about. And what about those two strange holes at the end? What a bizarre periscope!
There were herds of families who handed out cotton candy, candied apples, popcorn and peanuts, which one elephant devoured lustily. I wanted to join the fun. Dad picked me up shoulder high and I reached out with a handful of peanuts. For reasons only known to his elephantine mind, he swung his slimy, dirty trunk and whacked me on the side of my head. I shrieked; families recoiled backwards and gasped. Dad wiped off the foul smudge and threw our box of popcorn at the prodigious pachyderm. I screamed even harder. It looked at us with his gigantic eyes, then reached for the box, deftly picked it up with dexterity developed over the years. He dropped every single kernel into his mouth, not dropping one, and flung the empty box in our direction. As we left, he raised his truck and waved goodbye. I had a healthy reverence for elephants ever since and derive great gratification watching TV shows about elephants and local natives arguing about those maudering brutes raiding their crops at night - especially when they shot them.

This story mom told me years later; I have no recollection of it. Apparently, I had a hyperactive personality like every other six-year-old boy in this country. It was torture to sit still. I always broke my crayons before anyone else. I chewed on my pencil until I looked like a beaver reject, and had the messiest desk in the class. I used to dot my “I’s” so big the teacher would call them “cannonballs.” ADHD was my diagnosis. When I rode home on the bus one afternoon, mom realized I was abnormally sluggish. Droopy-eyed. No appetite for my milk and cookies. I slept all afternoon, and she could hardly awaken me for dinner.

“What’s wrong with you?”
“I don’t know.”
“Why are you so sleepy?”
“The nurse gave me a pill so I would sit still.”
“What?”

When dad heard about it, he hit the roof - his scull dented the ceiling sheetrock. We appeared at the principal’s office early next morning. Dad, dressed in his executive’s suit, was not someone to trifile with, much less patronize. “What is this business about your nurse giving Peter a pill? What did she give him?”

“Ah, something to calm him down.”
“What?”
“It’s called Seconal.”
Dad gave him a scowl and said, “Seconal? Isn’t that what they give mental patients?”
“Mr. Venable, I can assure you that was not our intent. Peter is a bright boy, but he has a problem, um, staying seated in his chair.”

“Mister, you ever to do that again to my son and I’ll sue you, your wife, the nurse, and the superintendent of schools. Do I make myself clear?”

I have no doubt that dad made himself unequivocally clear. There was no ambiguity about him. This was, as it turned out, my initiation into the world of mood-altering drugs. (Now it amounts to a nightcap of yogurt with a few spoonfuls of strawberry ice cream.)

Family dinnertime does not normally evoke pleasant memories. I gulped down the milk, devoured meat and rolls, and then the tribulation began. There are certain vegetables I detested then, and I do today: those vile green balls called Brussel sprouts; cauliflower that is the pallid
color of an old dog deposits; asparagus, which looks like a brood of baby green tree snakes; and,
the all-time worst tasting, slimy green substance that should be the main course in hell - spinach.
Whenever it was served, I had a racing heartbeat, weakness, hyperventilation, and vertigo. I
knew I was in for “You’ll eat a few bites or else.” Suppressing my gag reflex, the infernal plant
was unchewable, like a wad of green chewing gum. Moreover, it had a putrid odor that would
repel bluebottle flies.

“Eat your spinach.”
The portion was the size of a head of cabbage.
“Take a bite or you won’t get dessert.”
At these times, I didn’t care about dessert and would have been happy to be excused. No
such luck. Sometimes I would sit alone, long after everyone had left, even when mom finished
doing the dishes. She would either: 1, take it away and trash it in disgust; or 2, scoop it up on a
fork, force open my mouth, and stick it in. I had to swallow it then.

I would drown it in vinegar, which made it slightly more palpable. The problem was that
neither Boo nor Kitty had any interest in a masticated lump of ooze, which I found out the hard
way on one occasion: I dropped a wad under the table and later heard, “Peter, you come right
here.” So, being ingenious, I would stuff the foul mass under my tongue.
“Gotta go to the bathroom,” talking on the other side of my mouth and hoping none of it
would dribble on my chin as I zoomed toward the toilet - where it belonged.

On this noteworthy occasion, we had guests for dinner and mom made one of her favorite
pot roasts, but spinach was served. It looked like a fifties’ science fiction creation - a radioactive-
mutated thing that should have been a movie called The Green Blob. Unfortunately, after an
hour, there was too much of it on the plate for me to be able to hide it in the recesses of my
mouth, so I went for the old “cough-in-the-napkin” ploy. Victory! I crammed it in my front
pocket. Dessert never tasted so good, and I was pleased at my cunning. But the Fates had
predestined me for a tragic end. I was wearing white shorts. When I stood up, in the right front
pocket area, a large, wet, green circle widened in proportion to my parents dilating eyes.

“What is that?”
“Nothing.”
“What do you mean, nothing? What did you do?”
“I don’t know.” (You are familiar with these child’s two responses, no doubt.)
My amygdala’s are still dyed green. Revulsion reigns whenever my wife cooks spinach
for her dinner. I eat at the opposite end of the table as she chews the Green Giant’s excrement.

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Easter in Massachusetts is glorious. Grandpa Willis had a stupendous rose garden in the
backyard. When I walked into the kitchen Easter morning, besides the basket of chocolate
bunnies, chocolate eggs, and other cavity enhancers, was in a small cardboard box. Lifting the
lid, I looked at a purple baby chick. What a surprise! It peeped incessantly, looking at us with
innocent eyes. I named him “Peep.” What adventures we had, as it followed me in Gramp’s
backyard. I was the mother hen!

On the morning we were about to leave, mom, dad, and brother Paul were in the kitchen
as I entered for breakfast, I saw Peep’s box missing.

“Peter,” dad said, “a bad accident happened. Grandma’s stool fell on Peep, and it’s dead.”
After a cataclysm of tears, I asked, “Where is he? I want to bury him.”

There was a stunned silence, until mom said, “Well, he was hurt too bad that we didn’t want you to see him.”

“Where is he?”

Another protracted silence.

“We buried him.”

“Where? I want to see the grave.”

Another prolonged silence. I was indignant. “Where’s Peep buried?”

“We decided it would be easiest to flush him down the toilet.”

“He’s in the sewer?”

“We’ll get you another one next year. Promise. Come and eat; we have to leave soon.”

I did not realize that stools do not fall by themselves. Later I learned the truth. Peep wandered across the dog dish while Boo was eating and the mutt apparently did not appreciate the fat. He champed on him with the force of a jaguar. It was mercifully quick.

In West Springfield, Massachusetts, autumn comes quickly. We lived in an affluent subdivision and behind our house, between other homes, was a vacant lot. Thickets of weeds and small shrubs overran it. By now, most had died and were brown and withered.

One of the givens of the masculine experience, as axiomatic as “boys will be boys,” is that every boy will at least once in his life play with matches - ignoring the parental caution, “Never play with matches.” Is this some primordial collective consciousness that emerges, whenever a boy grabs a book of matches and goes outdoors? Is it the sense of power and mesmerization that ensures whenever that small flame ignites the object of his desire? What fun it was to hold a match under a plastic army man, watch it ignite and drop Lilliputian napalm bombs on ants or beetles in my hideout in the woods.

Back to the vacant lot. Nobody was around this windy fall day as I stepped into weeds up to my waist. I stopped next to a bunch of chestnut-parched goldenrod. Once again, the Fates were not with me. I lit one goldenrod blossom and it flared! Sparks ignited others and almost immediately a blaze commenced. Terrified, I tried to stomp the flames, which spread more sparks and, carried by the wind, set fire to other parts of the field. In a panic, I ran to a nearby house, pounded on the door, and a woman opened it.

“There’s a fire! There’s a fire!” I screamed.

“Who set it? Who set it?”

“I don’t know,” and ran from her yard, past my house, through the neighborhood, and into woods a mile from my house. I kept running deeper and deeper into the woods, tears streaming down my cheeks. Sirens blared in the background.

“I didn’t mean it God; I swear I didn’t mean it!” I pleaded. I do not think it is a hyperbole to say that never, in the history of humanity, has anyone ever pleaded a more heartfelt and urgent prayer.

Finally, I stopped by a large boulder. The lump in my throat was the size of a blimp. I imagined house after house was on fire, including mine! They’d know I set it! What would I do? Go to reform school? Then, I had clever idea. As I leaned against the rock, there was a jagged edge by my head. I would rub my lip against it until it cut and bled. When I got home and mom
and dad saw my bloody lip, they would feel sorry for me and forgive me! Even if they stood in front of smoldering, charcoal debris that was once in our house.

No luck. It was too painful. I gave up and began the long, lonely trek home. Dead man walking. The sirens stopped, at least. It was nearing twilight. In the distance, I heard mom’s calls, comparable to the noon air raids siren that blasted every Saturday.

“Peeeeeeeeeterrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!” “Peeeeeeeeeeterrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!”

I turned the corner of our street and thanked God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit that there was no billowing smoke or burnt-down houses. I entered our yard and stepped up to the front door. Do you remember those Jack and the Beanstalk cartoons on picture books? Can you see Jack climbing to the top of the beanstalk and standing beneath the giant’s mammoth door, the top of which was high as a building? I wished my door would miraculously become unhinged and fall on me. Crushed and bruised, I would have my parents’ sympathies. How long I stood there, I had no idea, but finally I opened the door and went inside.

“Where have you been? Dinner’s being served,” mom said.

It was too calm for comfort. I expected the apocalypse to hit any second. Dinner was normal and mercifully free from mom’s vile, vulgar, and venomous vegetables. I packed biscuits in my cheeks better than a chipmunk.

“There was a fire in that vacant lot,” mom mentioned. “They don’t know how it started. Firefighters put it out before it spread.” I froze.

“It was windy today. Guess the wind blew a spark or some fool tossed a lit cigarette,” dad concluded.

God answered this prayer. Now I understood what grace and mercy was all about. That concluded my pyromania phase.

*Education’s purpose is to replace an empty mind with an open one.* - Malcomb Forbes

We moved from West Springfield to Millburn, New Jersey. I went from being one of the best 6th grade athletes to a 7th grade cipher in a large junior high school. Everyone seemed so big! I shared my locker with a gargantuan hood. On the first day of school, he motioned that my coat and books would go on the bottom of the locker. Using the powers of frontal-lobe deduction, I discerned his books, combs, and stiletto would occupy the top shelf. Nor did I ever dispute his decision, even in the winter when his wet goulashes dripped on my notebooks and homework. I do not recall that we ever said a word to each other. His sneer, grunts, and posturing would suffice, and I gladly submitted to his high rank in the boys’ dominance hierarchy.

What did I care that he was an alpha male? Two years later, this alpha male and I had an English class with a notorious teacher, Mrs. Neil. He was about 18 as a 9th grader. One afternoon he crossed Mrs. Neil. She reared up and gave one of her infamous looks, pointed a finger.

“Mr. Nelson (vice principal) told me to be patient with you,” she snarled. “But if you say one more word, I’LL SLAP YOUR FACE!”

Bill, tomato red, slouched into his seat, and sat still as a corpse the rest of the year. Even quit combing his hair in class. Mrs. Neil had a way with words.

To be continued.
Ash Wednesday
Helen Walker Webb

It was Wednesday, February 17, 2021, a cold and windy day. Monday and Tuesday had been wet and cold. Freezing rain and ice were predicted for Thursday. But on this day, Ash Wednesday, the sun was out and the sky was clear blue. I considered the weather a gift from above.

For many years Knollwood Baptist Church has had a noon Ash Wednesday service, followed by a soup and bread lunch. Because of COVID-19, the service was an outdoor walk through service in the Memorial Garden, which adjoins the largest church parking lot. Folks could come and walk through any time between noon and 1:30 p.m. We were told to wear a mask and maintain social distance.

It was just noon when I drove into the parking lot. I was surprised at the number of cars already in the parking lot and thought that people must be waiting in their cars to take their turn to begin the walk. I found a close “drive through” parking space and noticed several people at the desk near the entrance to the Memorial Garden. The parked cars were empty. I got out of the car, put my mask on, and pulled the hood to my jacket up over my head.

I did not recognize the lady at the desk who gave me the order of worship form and told me I could join the four people already inside the gate. The masks made it difficult to recognize anyone.

The Memorial Garden is enclosed by a brick and wrought iron fence about five feet tall. Trees and shrubs on either side of the fence conceal three sides of the garden. Inside one can hear traffic but not see it. Once inside, we were greeted at the first station and read the opening prayer. Then proceeded to where Dr. Setzer was standing under the archway to the upper part of the garden. He led us in several prayers and then administered the imposition of ashes. I was a problem for Dr. Setzer. Between my mask, glasses, and hood, there was little room for an ash cross. He asked me to remove my hood, which I began to do, but the hood caught my wig and was lifting the wig off my head. Quickly he said that if it was a problem he would be very careful. I imagine he is still laughing.

At the next station was a table covered with a white cloth on which were scattered a variety of rocks. The rocks represented our sins or actions we wanted to turn away from during Lent and afterwards. After prayerful thought, we chose a rock and placed it the bowl which was also on the table. Then Josh Godwin, using a pitcher, poured water over the stones. It was very moving to see my sins being washed away.

As we continued our uphill walk toward the fourth station, I stopped at The Wall of Ashes monument to read the names of those whose ashes had been spread nearby. As I was thinking that I was indeed on a trail of ashes, I arrived at the fourth station. Katharine Martin was giving the group instructions to look around and find something of nature to put in the wreath which was in the middle of the cloth-covered table. This act represented our appreciation of
nature and recognition that we are part of nature. I found an interesting looking stick and placed it in the wreath.

Also on the table was a variety of colored rectangular cards. On the cards were words of actions or thoughts we might want to improve or develop during Lent. We were to select a card and pin it on the small bulletin board standing next to the table. My yellow card was the second on the board.

I then moved to the last station. Here Rozanna Gooccy pronounced the benediction and dismissal.

The entire experience was thought-provoking and meaningful. I felt enclosed in a space with God and fellow travelers on the same path toward heaven. I was in the world, doing worldly things, but had a feeling of being out of the world; enclosed from the world, but hearing sounds of the world.
2020 was a hard year for everyone. I’m not getting any younger. I long for the time when our family can get together and celebrate special occasions like we have always done.

A Valentine party with beautiful cards and a nice dinner. Chocolate cake and juicy red strawberries dipped in chocolate from the fountain that held the melted chocolate. And, of course, candy to take home.

Easter was so special with the sunrise service at Home Moravian Church and watching the sun rise over God’s acre where my family is buried. A traditional lunch with glazed ham, sweet potato casserole, green bean casserole, broccoli and cauliflower salad and German potato salad made from my recipe. Dessert was Dewey’s cake squares with bunny decorations on top and my chess tarts! After we stuffed ourselves, it was time for our annual Easter egg hunt in my big back yard with so many good hiding places. In the beginning I used to put candy in the plastic eggs, but as years went by, I wanted to change it up. So I started putting loose change in the eggs and a prize egg with a $5 bill. I then started having an adult Easter egg hunt after the kids. The children would help me put dollar bills, a couple $5 bills, and a $20 bill in the golden egg grand prize. I let them hide the eggs and they got so excited trying to come up with the best hiding places. Everyone loved it!

Halloween was so much fun! I used to have an outdoor get-together every year for family, friends and neighbors. I encouraged everyone to come in costume because I gave prizes for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place best costumes that I let everyone vote on. I also gave prizes for the best carved pumpkin. I would make homemade chicken stew and put it in a cauldron over an open fire pit outside. Tiki torches lit up the backyard where there were lots of scary decorations and music. Always a blast!

Thanksgiving was indeed a time to give thanks for my wonderful family. In the beginning when my kids were younger, I started the tradition with coming together and preparing food to celebrate our family. Through the years we invited others who had no family and were alone to join us. When my children got older and some had started their own families, we would divide our traditional foods to make and this also helped them to learn my recipes for the dishes. We have also added their own favorite recipes. Before we ate, we would form a circle holding hands and share what we were thankful for.

Christmas time is a big celebration. Going to the Candle Tea that the Women’s Fellowship of Home Moravian Church held every year at the beginning of Advent is one of our family traditions. It has been at the Single Brother’s House in Old Salem since 1929. We have waited for hours in all kinds of weather in long lines to attend. The tour begins with a history about the Moravians and how they settled in Salem and their traditions. All the guides wear the traditional attire of the early Moravians. Going into the next room, which is called the “Saal” or chapel, is a beautiful restored 1797 Tannenberg organ where guests are invited to sing carols. The next stop is where they share and show you how the beeswax candles are made that the Moravians are famous for. You can get them plain or with the frilly red paper fringe at the bottom. Next is one of my favorites, the kitchen, where you are served the special Moravian coffee and sugar cake. Going into the “putz” is cold, because that is where the brothers hung the meat since there was no refrigeration in those days. The “putz” is a detailed wintery scene of 1900’s Old Salem made of handmade houses. The last and most important is the Nativity that is lit up while the narrator reads from the Gospel of Luke. Christmas Eve we attend the Moravian Lovefeast at Home Moravian Church, which is decorated with swags of different kinds of greenery hanging from the ceiling of the sanctuary and beautiful big red poinsettias sitting on the altar. During the service they serve a Moravian
bun and Moravian coffee. Close to the end of the service they give you a Christmas beeswax taper candle which they light. During the last song everyone holds the candle up after they dim the lights. Beautiful Christmas ceremony.

Christmas Day is a big celebration. With my four children, spouses, thirteen grandchildren and six great-grandchildren, the house is indeed full. With the smell of the Christmas tree and all the decorations I have collected over the years and the stockings hung on the mantle, the day begins. I am big on taking pictures for every occasion and then some. Each family sits on my steps inside my house and gets a picture and then one with me also in it. They have grown accustomed to my ritual and always indulge me. Pictures mean a lot to me because a moment in time is gone forever if it's not captured in a picture. Again, all the traditional foods permeate the air and we overindulge with each savory morsel of food eaten. You can imagine the amount of presents!

Family means everything to me and I cherish the time we can spend together. The pandemic robbed all these traditions from us, but I am so very grateful we did not catch COVID.

I look forward to the day when we can gather again and share our love.
Childhood memories unwrapped

Betty Weatherman

Sitting in the middle of my grandparent’s huge feather bed bouncing to the tunes of records playing on the RCSA Victrola, looking out the window at my cousins playing games. Waiting for the time I could walk and run with them as part of the gang.

But as life would have it, at about 2, in the year 1929, after a train ride to Virginia, my first visit to my grandfather Isenhour’s farm, my dear young mother did not know it was unwise to all the passengers to hold me as their little doll. Soon after arriving back home, I became very ill. The doctor was called and revealed his worst fear. It was the dreaded scarlet fever to which there was no pill. The scaring features remain to this day. My right ear drum was punctured so often that it no longer hears. If that was not enough, the doctor then said, “Her tonsils are now infected, they must come out.” Which I recall quite clearly was a bit of an “ouch.”

But the next happening is one I shall never forget. A thing of surprise and wonder arrived right at the foot of my bed. There stood a bevy of smiling interns and nurses holding a colorfully wrapped box. What even now seems like magic as I opened the top, something so beautiful it would make any little girl’s heart skip a beat, if not totally stop - a complete, real China tea set with delicate hand-painted flowers and golden rims, all shining in place. That’s what I call indescribable happiness, the very best!

Then what did my dear grandfather Harris do with his kind, gentle, gifted hands? He fashioned a tea table and a cradle for my doll out of natural cedar wood, and even a coffee can well with a windless and a little snuff box bucket to wind up the water. I could have tea parties forever with all my friends, whether it be Dorothy, Clara, Rachel or Shirley, we were just a band of girls practicing the skills for our future world.

Then fast forward a while. There appeared, in my yard a huge box filled with gleaming white sand and lots of utensils to mix up a slurry of gritty sugar cookies or gingerbread to lay out to bake in the sun. YUM! Then with a bit more skill, I formed bucket pound cakes, turning them out in great numbers, each laboriously decorated with pebbles, leaves, swirls and acorns and such. Oh, what a joy remembering my little-girl world.

Then in time I would watch my mother mix and bake scrumptious biscuits of self-rising flour, buttermilk, and lard. Then dipping each one in her baking pan of warm butter, flip them over and bake to a golden brown in our old wood stove. Then a yummy privilege, I was allowed out to the front porch with the warm biscuits in hand to slowly pinch off bits to nibble and watch for my dad to come home from work, tired and hungry, carrying his lard tin lunch bucket, empty again.

Then our family sat by the heat of the stove (summer and winter) and offered a blessing, asking for strength of body and soul. Then we enjoyed the partaking of a familiar menu of the day, soft cooked any kind of dried beans, baked sweet potatoes, crunchy slaw, and hot cornbread. Often there was apple, peach, or blackberry cobbler. Whatever, we could pick from nature that day. Nothing fancy, but oh so nourishing in every way.
Then as I grew a bit, the difficult days of the Great Depression began to unfold. Everyone shared with others whatever they had. What a lesson in kindness I was taught in those days. A knock on the door and there stood a hungry person pleading for food. I can see my mother now as she opened the warmer of the stove, gently pulling out a biscuit and render a side meat to slip inside, and if she had one, it went into a little brown paper bag. It is then she spoke the endearing words of giving. “Go, give this to your friend standing in the cold.”

To me there was no better or greater lesson of life that could have been taught than to know that kindness and sharing was always present in our home and at our door.
After COVID Came

By William Gramley

You put a vase of scarlet tulips on my grave, a summer gift,
and I expect you’ll bring a clutch of wildflowers from a rural road,
the September yellow ones so bright whose names I do not know,
my mound in golden glee!

I’ll watch November’s raucous, rusted leaves
invade the shallow moats around my plot and there enrich the soil.
All this will comfort me when cold and shorter days
stiffen the stalks of those winter weeds I love to watch.

Yet violets blue upon the ground and daffodils above
will soon unfurl their flags of hope and joy!

I know you’ll come around again
And we can speak of all the treks we took
To catch the colors each season brought, then shed,
Since we believed such glory would never end.

Then COVID came.
What If
Jessie Crockett

What if each morning we awake,
There was no dew; sunshine or rain?
But just another day with more strain?

What if a call came and brightened the day,
With joy that no amount of money could pay?

What if each day we could look around?
Surely someone could be found
To share some hope, even with pain,
And believe with loss, there can also be gain.

What if we realized there will be strife,
At different places and times in life?

When what ifs can be put aside,
There are many things we can achieve,
In spite of the what ifs when we can only believe.
She practices ninja training-
Jumping front kicks, flying side kicks,
back kicks (Pa Pa clutching her old crib mattress)
then charges Cobra Kung Fu fingers to rip it open

Until I prop it on the top staircase;
She lays on her back, clings for dear life, and
Rides it to the bottom bouncing and
Squealing and giggling over and over

As she does when clutching her unicorn’s
mane, streaming down a rainbow into candy land,
grabbing treats from Caramel Cottage, Peppermint Forest,
Lollipop Lane, Gummy Snake Ridge and of course
Snow Cone Palace, Uni’s chocolate hoofprints behind.

Then Emma’s afternoon tea party- daintily sipping
Apricot juice with M&M’s melting on the bottom
And toasting her Barbies sitting on the couch.

Mom arrives, Emma grabs Ela and
We watch their SUV drive out of sight.
The floor, ankle deep with Legos
(Sharp as bottle caps), plastic animals, push pins,
Mermaids, two velociraptors, stuffed animals…
I wear steel-soled boots
Picking up this toy story landfill…

Cartwheels begin next year or the next

Days of grace until age thirteen.
A sunset

Carmina Peggy Jenks

The evening’s sunset was not impressive.
No brilliant reds or golden rays
Emanating from billowing cloud.

Something else.

Stark contrast between coal black-spiked tree branches
Reaching upwards,
Naked of leaf,
Filigree-like,
Pointing jaggedly away from trunks,
Needles, piercing the fabric of color,
Silhouetted in front of a backdrop movie set or
An Indonesian shadow play.

Striated layers of thin tapering, wispy,
Pale orange-colored clouds
In between patches of vivid aqua blue sky,
Stacked on top of the other…..
Blue
Orange
Blue
Orange
Blue

Fascinated,
Drawn in by the dramatic scene
In awe and gratitude
Another gift of Nature
Given just to me.
In these passing moments.
The Pandemic

Judith Ruff

Days running together
Family and friends having to stay afar
Traditions are on hold
Masks are mandatory
People won’t abide by it
Sickness and death for some
Isolation for others
Like living in another world
Will this madness ever end?
Not until we follow the rules
And think of others
It Touched Me

Betty Weatherman

Do you remember those tiny soft fingers?
That grasp yours and clung oh so tight
Although holding on – for dear life
Clinging to the only world they knew
That dear Mom, was you
Then as you rocked and sang to them a bit
They soon dropped off to a relaxed and peaceful sleep
As to say, “I feel so safe and secure in your arms.”
Oh what that warm little bundle could say to your heart
Even though as yet it had no words
With only that tender embrace of your finger
An indelible memory was left
To tuck away forever in your life’s Treasure Chest
Safely there, it will NEVER gather dust
Nor – can it ever be replaced!
SHORT STORY
Shortly after President Trump went down in that amazing Western shoot-out near the O.K. Corral at High Noon on November 3, 2020, I had a chance to talk with him. You’ll remember how he and the sheriff, “Sleepy Joe,” met in the usual duel on the main street of America where people hid behind the watering troughs, wooden barrels and saloon doors. Trump fired first and fast from his hip, as he always does, with his 232, but his bull shots whistled just past the sheriff who used his 306 with national buckshot accuracy to wound the villain and end his reign of terror. The crowd cheered. He was hit hard. He was down, but he wasn’t out. He was out but he wasn’t gone. He was gone and was recovering in various courts for quite a while with his gang of co-conspirators and hallucinators, but would come back, and that’s why I had a chance to talk to him on his golf course in Florida.

He knew I was from FNG (Fake News Galore), and that made it easier to chat, like one of his fireside chats of yesteryear: friendly, calm, and reassuring for the people whom he loved to serve and not put into a panic. The first thing he said was that he did watch Fox News and avoided Wolf Blitzer. You’d think the two critters would be compadres. And that led to my question about why there had been so many spokespersons or communications directors over the years, you know, folks like Spicer, Dubke, Scaramucci, Hicks, and others who came out to a lectern and clarified rumors and graciously answered stupid questions from the so-called news media. He said, “I kept searching for someone who spoke the King’s English like I does and don’t go around with them pointy-headed big syllable words. I didn’t want nobody to use nothin’ past three syllables, like ‘fantastic,’ my favorite word, or “great,” like, “He’s done ‘a great job’ (before I Twittered him out),” and so forth, time after time. I got me some 200 words in my gut and that’s all anyone needs!”

“Well, speaking of your ‘gut’ before we move on, do you think 244 pounds is a good fit for you?”

“Oh yeah, I’m healthy as can be. No President has ever been healthier than me. You know of anyone who got that stupid virus bug and bounced back like me in a couple days? No one! I took a shot of chloroform and dipped my bottom in Clorox and snapped back real fast! I eat right, drink right, drive right, love right, no lust, no cheating on nobody, no debts, nothing. You can’t name anything that I don’t do right. I got a free conscience. And by the way, watch this drive! It always slices to the right, never hooks to the left. That’s for hookers and left-wing nuts like Crazy Bernie, not for me.”

“Right you are, Chief. But going back to the words you love to use: you surely don’t need no artic-u-la-tor or something like that with five syllables. Your baseless approach who Made America Great Again love your red, white, and blue ‘smash mouth’ approach. ‘It is what it is,’ ‘The virus is a fantasy and will pass quickly,’ stuff like that, bully pulpitering all the way. I remember the vivid and kindly way you put things: ‘There’s good people on both sides,’ (especially after a guy ran down a protester and killed her); ‘We don’t deal with outhouse countries.’ And the way you called those dumb NFL players ‘those sons of a gun’ for kneeling while our sacred and im-pec-cable Star-Spangled Banner was played with the flag so gallantly waving. But you had more than those words. You were so great at giving neat little nicknames to people that you liked, affectionate kissy-kissy terms that simply hit the mark. I remember ‘Pocahontas’ for Elizabeth Warren and ‘Crooked Hillary’ that you wanted to lock up, and
Nervous Nancy’ and ‘Little Adam Schiff,’ and ‘Crazy Jim Acosta,’ and ‘dupes and losers’ for those suckers who died at Normandy. You had them nailed, didn’t you?”

“I did. I summed them up. There’s no reason to “e-lab-or-ate” (there’s my four-syllable limit). America is black or White, basically and always White, especially with Norwegians coming here. It’s winners and losers, law and order, and if one or two of my friends gets indicted or jailed for some flimsy reason or as part of the worst witch hunt in history, I clear ‘em up and pardon ’em. I know who is guilty and what they deserve before they even get charged. I call the shots! Nobody knows more about justice and right and wrong than I do! I’ve put hundreds of good old conservative judges in the courts to get America back where it belongs; the High Court too. It’s a free country. And if I want to go and hold a Bible in front of a church, I can clear those communist protestors off the nearby streets! I got the troops to do it. I’m Commander in Chief! No one is more upright and Christian than me. I know what the Bible says. It says, ‘If you spare the rod, you’ll spoil the child,’ and I’m not about the spoil one.”

“You know, you’ve surely run things the way you see the world, and that seems like the way a president ought to act. Am I right?”

“Of course, you know my motto: Democracy, Integrity, Blame! Moreover, I got us out of those treaties that were taking away our right to life, liberty, the pursuit of the American Dream! We don’t need restrictions and regulations. Look how Putin and Kim Jung-un run their countries. Big military parades, that’s what I like! And I’m going to have one in my second term, I am! What those guys say is all there is to it. Done. Hold no prisoners! We don’t need clean air or Iranian deals or NATO treaties or that stupid World Health Organization. What’s the sense of that? I know more about nature and weapons and leadership and how viruses fade away than anyone else. And when people say I don’t rely on science, you ought to know I majored in science in college: astrology, cosmetology (it cost me $70,000 to pass the course), and fabrication (in which I continue to excel).”

“I have a couple more questions if you don’t mind. I notice on the back of your t-shirt you have the Scout Law printed: ‘A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.’ Are there any of those that you don’t personify? For example, I see you smiling and laughing and loving life and being cheerful day and night! And when I watch you on TV, I say, ‘Wow, there’s my man!’”

“That couldn’t sum me up better - courteous, clean, thrifty - the whole deal. And some days I wear the shirt that says, ‘I won the Silver Beaver Award for outstanding leadership!’”

“I hate to ask you this, but it’s bred into me as a fake newsy guy, but are you a con artist? I mean someone suggested it.”

“Oh, yes, I’m one of the best!”

“Do you like women?”

“Are there any cows in Texas?”

“Do you ever admit a mistake?”
“Never. The best defense is ‘Attack and Distract!’ That’s another of my mottos. And it works! Now watch this putt … see it hit that red, white and blue flag, bounced back a bit, and goes in! Just like me! I’m in and you can’t get me out!”

“That was a fantastic finish, Chief. You’ve easily won the Presidential golfing championship, an accolade worthy of a king! But did I see you take three mulligans on that final hole?”

As I left the golf course, I wondered if he ever cheated on anything besides golf. No, he wouldn’t, not this president. And then I heard a voice in the distance singing in a sleepy kind of tone an old Irish ballad. I think he put it like this:

“O Donny Boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling
From state to state and down the mountain’s slide.
Your tenure’s gone and all your folly’s falling.
‘Tis you, ‘tis you must go and I must now preside.”
I had no idea just how exhausted I was. I decided to get a cup of coffee to try and wake me up a little. I wandered along to the coffee shack two doors down from the lawyer’s office. I found an empty seat and ordered my coffee and a donut. Maybe the sugar would give me enough kick to drive home. I took a long drink of the coffee even though it was hot enough to make my eyes water. I glanced around hoping no one noticed the tears from the hot coffee. As I glanced at the seat beside me, I noticed a magazine someone had left behind. There was a bright photograph of a sunny beach, waving palm trees and happy bodies frolicking or laying cooking in the sun. In big type under the photo, “Are you ready? Do YOU deserve a vacation?” I smiled. Yes indeed, I did deserve a vacation. I think the last time I had anything resembling a vacation was a long weekend on a wet cold Nantucket in October two years ago.

I finished my coffee, swallowed down my last bite of donut, gathered up my purse and made my way toward the door. Only when I was paying the tab did I realize I had picked up the magazine. I thought about putting it back or leaving it on the counter, but with several people waiting behind me, I tucked it under my arm and hurried off to retrieve my car and get home without any problems.

I managed to unlock the front door, stagger into the house, shed my coat, and throw myself on the sofa. I was really tired, but without thinking I picked up the magazine to see what happy people were doing on their vacations, but two pages into the colorful edition I fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

I woke up a couple of hours later and realized I was hungry. I had not eaten lunch and the donut was long gone. Without enthusiasm I ordered a pizza and went to see if there was any wine left on the kitchen counter. Just about enough for a couple of small glasses. I went and washed my face, combed my hair and went to wait for my pizza. I sipped the wine and picked up the magazine, which was open to a page showing photos of Paris, Italy and Barcelona. I knew that I certainly would not contemplate a vacation in a big bustling city at the moment. I would like somewhere beautiful and restful so that I could write more of the novel I had started and had to put aside while dealing with my divorce.

Just then the pizza arrived and I was surprised that I actually really enjoyed it. After cleaning up the paper plate and napkins, I went back to the magazine. Near the back page I saw a photo of fields of lovely green grape vines stretching away to some rolling hills, to the left of the photo was the winery. “That’s more like it” I thought. It was probably expensive, but then I suddenly realized I didn’t have to worry about the cost because my bank account was now really fattened up from the divorce settlement.

I finished the wine and decided that in the morning I would visit a travel agent to see what was available. I slept well that night and woke feeling refreshed and ready to get my adventure started.
It felt like forever, but within two weeks I was standing outside Villa Rosa, the small hotel which was part of the Tre Rs Vineyard. It was early evening, but even though I was tired from the trip, I could see my dream from a lovely terrace. Vines were cascading down the hills into the distance. I had chosen well.

We were ushered into the hotel and met by Rosa herself. There was another couple checking in and we were taken into a sitting area where we were treated to hors d’oeuvres and a lovely red wine. Rosa knew that we were tired from our travels and told us that we might like to take a glass of wine to our rooms. Breakfast would be available from 5 a.m. until 9:30 a.m. and then we would be given a few details of the winery and the hotel area.

My room was one of the two single rooms available and was quite lovely. When the shutters were open, my window looked out across the green of the vineyard, and off to the left wound the road that had brought us to this lovely spot. I stood and gazed at the scene before I realized I was really jet lagged and needed to sleep. It didn’t take long before I was in a deep sleep with no dreams of lawyers or difficult decisions to be made.

I was amazed when I finally opened my eyes and saw sunlight peeking through the edge of the shutters. I had slept for eight or nine hours. I got out of the comfortable bed, opened the shutters and gazed at the scene bathed in glorious sunlight. So much better than any photos in the brochures that had lured me here! This was the real Tuscany and I was entranced. I had a welcome shower and as it was Sunday, and because I was not sure of the etiquette of the day, I wore cool pants and a lightweight blouse.

I went downstairs and headed in the direction of the quiet conversation. There were three couples seated at the tables, and myself. Rosa came out of the door to what I guessed was the kitchen and inquired if I had slept well. I was offered tea or coffee and a lovely breakfast with local ham, eggs from the farm nearby, fresh orange juice from the garden, and lovely warm homemade bread. Rosa then came back from the kitchen to introduce us to each other. Linda and Charlie were from New York, Wally and Fran from Yorkshire, and Rebecca and Nolan, (newlyweds) came from Virginia.

Rosa then began to tell us a little about the hotel. It had been built about two hundred years ago on what apparently was the foundation of a Roman home, and was then lived in by one family for generations. Each generation had added more space for their growing families. It had needed a lot of upgrading to make it into the hotel that we saw today, but was well worth the effort. The vineyard had been here even longer and had mostly served the local area.

Rosa and her husband Ralph, an English man, had come here ten years ago on a cycling holiday, fell in love with the area and bought the house, vineyard and winery, lock stock and barrel. They had never regretted it.

We then learned about what we would see if we explored the grounds and the winery. As it was Sunday, we would be free to look into the winery and taste the wines. We could wander up to the barns where there were horses we could ride during the week, and we could peer into the large garages where the equipment was kept for the upkeep of everything, including the vineyard. Closer to the hotel were places to relax in hammocks or chaises and a small swimming pool in which to get refreshed after our walks. Lunch would be a help-yourself buffet on the terrace, available from twelve until two. All Rosa asked was that we leave everything clean and
tidy, as the hotel staff tried to take some time off to relax or visit family on Sundays. Tomorrow we would meet Ralph and he would tell us more about the area, the vineyard and the nearby town.

Rosa left us with that information and then we all wandered off to decide what to do first. I chose to check out the winery and was surprised to see a number of people tasting the wines. I then saw a coach parked a little way from the winery. This was apparently a tour. I saw that it was very busy so after a quick look around, I went out, headed around the side of the building and wandered up to the equipment garage. It was very impressive to see the large machines, but what their function was I was clueless. I then saw other smaller garages where there were cars and bicycles and other useful things.

I walked on up toward the stables. Leaning on the fence, scratching the ears of a lovely horse, was a very large man. He must have been nearly seven feet tall and was all muscle. The horses were all out in the fields enjoying the sun and I suppose it was a day off for them also. I looked at my watch and could not believe it was almost lunch time. With a last look at the horses and their little companion donkey, I wandered back toward the hotel. I stopped to look at the very inviting pool and the hammocks hung up under arbors of shady vine and Bougainville. Nestled happily on one of the hammocks and completely unaware of my presence were Rebecca and Nolan. “I hope they always stay this happy and content” I thought.

I went back to the hotel and saw that the lunch was beautifully displayed on the terrace. Helping themselves were Wally and Fran. They found a table and spotting me, invited me to join them. I soon learned about life in rural Yorkshire and I in turn told them about Baltimore and my efforts to finish researching and writing my book.

I admitted I would find it difficult to keep my mind on the job in what I considered was paradise. Feeling very replete, I went up to my room and wondered what to do next. While pondering this dilemma, I sprawled across the bed and quickly nodded off. A real nap, what bliss!

I spent the rest of the afternoon by the pool on a chaise and diligently went over my notes and scribbles trying to put together another chapter of the book. At last I put the notebook aside and relaxed in the pool. The water was warm and the view quite lovely through the screen of vines some of which I had never seen before and determined to find out what they were. While I was pondering the vines I was joined by Linda. Charlie still hadn’t woken up from his after lunch nap. I could relate to that. Linda and I discussed the difference between most of Europe and the U.S. and agreed both had their good and bad sides, but right now we were enjoying the good side. I soon packed up my notes and towel and headed back to my room to shower and make myself respectable for dinner.

After dinner we sat in the lounge while Ralph gave a short talk about the area and the tours that ran every other day from the town to places of interest with a stop for lunch. A good adventure to add to my “to do” list. He told us that the best way to learn about the vines, the grapes, the harvest and other reasons why the wine was so great here in Tuscany was to get the winery tour. The only wine I was familiar with from this area was Sangiovese, but there were apparently several more all worth trying, and several varieties of the grapes I had never heard of.

The man responsible for producing a good wine each year was Paul, a master at his craft
and highly trained. He was from France but had studied in California, North Carolina, and other
great wine producing areas of the world. He had an apprentice working with him who gave
interesting talks while walking the rows of vines with visitors. Most of his knowledge he gleaned
from Paul, but he certainly had learned a lot. Ralph explained that he himself chose working at
the upkeep and heavy work alongside the local men, who loved working outside watching the
vines mature.

One question that someone asked was about the third “R” in the vineyards name. He
smiled, whistled and watched. Then bounding into the lounge appeared a lovely, tail-wagging
chocolate lab. This was the third R. Rolo, named after Ralph’s favorite English candy, smooth
chocolate on the outside and all sweetness on the inside.

The other thing Ralph wished to talk about was the control of the small animals that
nibbled the base of the vines and any shoots or branches that hung down for their dining pleasure
thus damaging the vine. Ralph and Rosa did not want to put down chemicals or poison for
control, so they had consulted a local university. The experts came up with the answer: owls. If
we looked, we would see the roosting boxes built high around the vineyard. The university
studied the owls and their pellets to make sure there was enough food for the three boxes of
owls, and that the small creatures the owls consumed were not being wiped out. So far it was
working well. If we looked out just after dusk, we should see the owls flying silently over the
vines.

Ralph then excused himself, telling us to make ourselves at home, and enjoy the sun and
the wine. He walked off with tail-wagging Rolo, wishing us a lovely day and said that he would
see us at dinner.

The next morning I decided to take the house car into the small town. Rebecca and Nolan
also went along for the ride and were going to have lunch in one of the small cafes.
I joined them after a leisurely walk around the town and had a lovely lunch accompanied by a bottle of Tre Rs
wine. We discussed the morning talk by Ralph and I said that I would love to get photos of the
owls. Rebecca and Nolan were happy, a delightful young couple, full of plans for their future,
while I was quietly planning a photo shoot of the owls.

When I got back to the hotel, I sat in the lounge with a glass of wine and then went to my
room to clean and check my camera.

In the morning I went to the stables to take some photos of the horses and was delighted
to have Rolo along for company. He was quite photogenic, and seemed to sense that he was
mostly the center of attention. The camera worked well, so I was ready to watch and photograph
the owls.

The next evening after dinner I would wait for dusk and then venture out to the vines. At
dinner everyone discussed their day and showed off some of their purchases from the town that
afternoon. It was another great dinner and we all felt happy and well fed. I went out through the
terrace and wandered down to the gate into the rows of vines. It seemed oppressively hot, but I
thought it might be from drinking three glasses of the wine with dinner. I went through the gate,
wandered down the edge of the vines and gazed up, keeping a watch for the owls. I soon realized
I would have to venture further into the rows of vines if I was to get pictures of the silent owls as
they kept their beady eyes wide open searching for prey. I went down to the tree line and walked
until I thought I was a good way into the rows. I started up the slope and chose what I thought would be a good vantage point. I sat down to catch my breath and readied my camera. Now I must just wait for these lovely, silently gliding birds to fly over me. As I was gazing upwards, I noticed the clouds were thickening and darkening further up the valley. I decided to wait a little longer, but if it started to rain I would give up and try again tomorrow.

I waited quietly and thought I saw one of the owls gliding towards me. It was like watching a small silver cloud. Just then I felt the first rain drop. Could I wait long enough to get a good photo of the bird? I raised the camera and felt the rain coming down harder. I ducked down under the vine to make sure the camera didn’t get wet. I was packing it away and it was at that point I heard the thunder. I poked my head up through the vine leaves and saw lightning strikes coming right over the middle of the valley. The storm was gathering momentum and the rain was coming down very heavily now. What was I going to do? I wondered if I could wait the storm out tucked under this lovely bushy vine. Surely it couldn’t last long, but the lightning was getting intense and the thunder louder and very frequent.

By now I was getting very wet despite the leafy cover. Could I make it back to the hotel without getting struck by lightning? I had heard that you should stay low, even laying in a ditch. The row between the vines was becoming a small stream and my feet were getting soaked. I stretched a little and away went my shoe. I pushed my foot out to retrieve it but only succeeded in tearing my ankle on a small branch or root. It was very painful and I was getting very anxious at the intensity of the storm. I think I should say I was scared, and realized how stupid it was that I had not told anyone where I was going, and I hadn’t even thought to bring a flashlight. I am not usually thoughtless, but I had not anticipated a thunderstorm.

The storm was gathering momentum and the rain seemed like a huge waterfall over the vines. I was about to stick my head up through the leaves to see if it was abating when a flash of lightning like I had never seen before made my hair seem to stand on end, and at that same moment an incredible crash of thunder shook the whole area around me. The smell of electricity was powerful for a minute. I must admit that I don’t usually scream when scared, but this time I did. I was sure at that point that I was going to be killed by a flash of lightning and no one would find my frazzled body under the vine. I was so scared trying to curl up in the vine leaves away from this monstrous storm. I then realized that it was pitch dark. The clouds were so thick, and no light came from the hotel, which made it feel like being shut in a cold dark cellar. The rain came down even harder, and I was shivering both from fear and cold. I thought maybe the storm would go over soon but it seemed that another round was coming down the valley. I wondered how long I had been cowering under the leaves. I was soaked to the skin and my ankle was very painful from the gash and the scrape. Things went quiet for a minute and I was convinced I heard something. It sounded like an animal. Was I now going to be prey for an animal from the woods? How silly that must sound, but I was in no mood to be rational. I stayed very still, listening for another sound, but heard nothing but the rain and thunder.

After a while I heard something. It sounded like a dog barking but I wasn’t sure. Maybe the last crash of thunder had deadened my hearing. Maybe they had wolves here. I told myself to straighten up and stop the silly thoughts. Just then I heard something sloshing down between the rows of vines and shut my eyes for whatever was out there. Suddenly something pushed through
the leaves and licked my face and started barking. It was Rolo. I hugged the soaking wet dog and let out a pitiful call for help. Then two large flashlights shone on the wet vine and two men in rain gear appeared. They bent down to see if I was all right and then began to extract me from the vine. I suffered a few more scratches on my face and neck, but could do little but cry. I was suddenly wrapped in big rain coat and was hefted over the shoulders of a very large man who I thought I recognized as the man I had seen at the barn.

I remembered little else until we shed the rain gear on the terrace and went through the hotel door. Everything became a blur as I was gently lifted up the stairs and taken to my room. Later I remembered being told to take my clothes off, dry myself with big towels and put on a big bathrobe. I was sitting on the bed and Rosa appeared with a first aid kit. She gently cleaned and bandaged my ankle. A bowl of soup was put in my hands and then I must have climbed into the bed, finished the soup, and slipped into sleep because the next thing I saw was the sun peeping through the shutters.

I sat up and tried to remember if anything else happened. I then noticed that all my wet clothes and the towels were gone. A knock on the door brought Rosa into the room with a tray bearing coffee and a couple of pastries. Once more tears of shame trickled down my face. Rosa would have none of it. We would talk later. I wondered why Rosa was so concerned about me but thinking about it, I realized she was a very caring person, not just concerned about her guests but about their lovely hotel.

After some coffee and one of the pastries, I went to the bathroom to see what damage I had done to my face, but was surprised that after washing it gently the nicks and scratches were barely noticeable. I found some clean clothes and some flip flops that I had used for the pool, then I took a big breath and went down stairs. As it was quite late, the only people around were Rebecca and Nolan. Rebecca hugged me and said that she had been so frightened for me. She herself admitted to being very scared by the intensity of the storm, especially when the lights went out. When Rosa realized I was not in my room as she was delivering a lantern, she asked if anyone had seen me. Rebecca remembered that after dinner I had gone out of the hotel toward the gate with my camera case on my shoulder. Ralph was summoned, and as you now know, a foolish woman went looking for owls and found a monster storm.

Rebecca and Nolan were leaving the next day to visit Rome for a few days before flying home, so we had a lovely family-style dinner to celebrate their marriage, my rescue, and the fact that although power had been out everywhere, no one was injured. There was some damage on the road to town and a huge old tree at the edge of the woods was hit by the biggest and loudest crash of lightning and thunder. It burned and scorched some small trees, but the rain quelled the fire and it didn’t hit or damage any of the buildings.

There was a short article in a local newspaper about the storm’s severity, but no mention of my mishap for which I was very glad. At the dinner I met the local doctor - a tall, fit and charming man. He inquired about my ankle and invited me to have a glass of wine out on the terrace. We talked for a while about his clinic and my effort at writing a novel. He gave me his card and asked if he could visit me if he made it back to Washington for another conference, and of course, without hesitation I said I would be delighted. I would be a fool to say no to this handsome and charming man. I told him I would send him my new address as soon as I found a
new house. I noticed he was checking his phone frequently, explaining that he had a notion a baby was about to be born in the town at any moment. Sure enough his phone rang, and after saying goodbye to Nolan and Rebecca, hugging Rosa, waving to me, and running to his car, he was off to greet the new baby.

I spent the next morning seeking out Carlo. I had found out his name last night. I found him in the tack room at the barn and probably embarrassed him by throwing my arms around him and hugging his big chest. Rolo was my constant companion whenever I went anywhere and now I really miss my rescue pup. Later I sent Rebecca and Nolan a lovely miniature carving of the bird box with a beautiful silvery white owl peeping out. I also found a lovely carving of a dog resembling Rolo. They were both made by a craftsman near the town and his work was excellent.

The next day Wally, Fran, and I teamed up and decided to go on one of the tour buses to see the countryside. It was lovely, with rolling hills, many villas scattered on the hillside, farms and of course vineyards. We stopped at a town for lunch and wandered around afterwards, realizing it was somewhat bigger than it first appeared.

After treating ourselves to a gelato, we headed back to the bus and continued on to what had been an impressive abbey. It was now in ruins but was carefully tended by monks from a nearby monastery. The gardens were lovely and had an amazing herb garden. The smell was delightful and we were each given a small bouquet to take with us on the ride back to town.

After dinner I went for a last swim, then spent the rest of the evening packing for my journey home. After breakfast I said fond farewells to everyone and hugged beautiful Rolo. I was then on my way back to Baltimore, having assured Rosa and Ralph that I would be back the next year if they promised no more monster storms over the vineyard.

Most of the people I met at Rosa’s have kept in touch with me since my vacation in paradise. This is the first short story I have written about Tre Rs Winery and Rosa’s hotel, but it won’t be the last as I intend to go back to Tuscany every year if possible to discover more about this beautiful place. Hopefully I shall get to know some new and interesting people and meet up again with the friends I made this time, people I have come to know very well and have become very fond of.
Snail Mail from Mr. Yikes

Betty Weatherman

Childhood memories galore, with a bit of gore from a little tyke I called Mr. Yikes. We will now be opening an old can of worms that both he and I must explore. 

Now, in my later years, it’s as though he speaks to me as to explain our often shared trail of tears. This is what I hear:

“Don’t tread on me or I will freak you out with the slime I will deposit on your route. So you best not squish my antenna or trample my stripes or I will release my secret weapon and when I am finished, you’ll be screaming “Yikes!” Because being a wormy, squirmy little creature, I was given incredible defenses that are even neater. What I exude can quickly change your altitude and your attitude. For when you step on my extensions and skid to the ground, you’re sure to feel more sad than glad.

But please don’t think I meant to harass - not at all - it’s just because, while playing, you stepped into my slimy path. So if at times you are inclined to call me a name, what I hear you yell so often, “Mr. Yikes” will be fine, okay? Please don’t let our relationship end like this. I’ll be back tomorrow night, will you?”

Ah, as I now recall those childhood evenings, running barefoot free in the grass, playing hide and seek and suddenly you hit the skids, it was then you had encountered Mr. Yikes and he had struck again! The feel of his zeal on my heel will remain in my memory bank forever - even when I hit my final skid.

In my all of life, Mr. Yikes will always reign supreme as the king of all slime machines.
When I was very, very young, I cried uncontrollably because I couldn’t go with my sister to her prom. She looked like a princess with her beautiful dress. I knew she was going to have fun and I did not understand why I couldn't go with her. After that, I looked forward and couldn’t wait to turn 16 years old so I could get my driver’s license.

It’s funny how we wish our lives away and think we have forever. I thought I was grown up and married at 16 and had a son at 17. Unfortunately, I was way more mature than my husband, so it only lasted two and a half years because of his infidelity. Remarried at 24 and birthed three more children and discovered I married the same type of person as before: womanizer and alcoholic. I was determined to try to make it work, but after 18 years of mental abuse and being belittled in so many ways, I left.

Moved to my home town where only after six weeks, my mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. And a few months later, my father had a massive stroke. I not only had my children to take care of and provide for, but I became a caretaker to my parents. I ended up working four jobs to support my kids because I wasn’t getting any child support. Also restoring a house for us to live in, it didn’t give any free time.

I was so in a hurry to grow up when I was young, now I wish I could turn back the clock. Going through so much heartache in my own life and then seeing my parents who were my rock, deteriorating before my eyes, was a rude awakening how fragile life is and we must take every minute and cherish them.

I have watched my mother and father, brother and two sisters die. It is so painful to see their last breath taken from them. I know this is the circle of life, but it is still devastating. I know our days are numbered on earth and I cherish each one, but I’m not ready to go. I was so busy taking care of everybody else, I forgot about me. I’ve also been a giver and never really took the time to replenish my soul. I ended up with rheumatoid arthritis that wrecked my entire body. After many operations, I was able to repair some of the disabilities, but am limited in what I can do.

At my age I feel like I have lost so much time and I want to live forever to be able to continue to be with my children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. I am grateful I am still here and will treasure the remaining time on this earth.
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