To the creators of the works included in this year’s *Spotlight* magazine -

Thank you. Thank you for sharing your deeply personal stories, your art, those works of fiction and poetry that still reveal a bit of yourselves. It was my absolute privilege to review this year’s magazine, and to learn more about those members of our Tufts OLLI community.

To Kathy Scanlon, Kathleen Mayzel, and Joyce Callaghan – Thank you for the time and care you devoted to organizing and editing our wonderful submissions. I know it was done in a way that honors the original works our members dedicated so much time to creating.

And to the Tufts Osher Lifelong Learning Institute community – Thank you for taking the time to appreciate those stories and works shared with you.

I hope you all enjoy this year’s Spotlight as much as I have.
Enjoy!

Callan B. Moody
Associate Director, Tufts Osher Lifelong Learning Institute

Published May 2023
Spotlight  
Spring/Summer 2023  

Images

Judith Dortz.............................................. Quiet................................................................. cover
Cited by David Ellis .................................. Several Circles ..................................................... 2
Valarie Poitier.......................................... 240 Million African Slaves Ago .................. 15
Judith Dortz............................................. Magnolias ....................................................... 22
Lora Brody.............................................. The Reunion Project Photos ...................... 42

Poetry

David Ellis.............................................. Circles ................................................................. 2

Fiction & Essays

Chris Farrow-Noble................................. Don’t Go Back to Sleep ................................... 5
Adelaide MacMurray-Cooper................. Great-Grandfather Junius .......................... 10
Valarie Poitier.......................................... 240 Million African Slaves Ago .................. 15
Polly Ann Tausch..................................... Bertha and I ................................................ 20
Joyce Callaghan...................................... David and I .................................................. 23
Carol Agate............................................ Growing up Jewish -- Sort of ....................... 27
Richard Trakimas................................... History Becomes Real .................................. 30
Richard Trakimas................................... Into the World of Dads .................................. 33
Irene Hannigan...................................... Jake’s Solution .............................................. 35
Laura Brooks ........................................ Mr Birge ...................................................... 37
Irene Hannigan...................................... Peach Kuchen .............................................. 39
Lora Brody.............................................. The Reunion Project .................................. 42
Pam Giller.............................................. Vineyard Days, Vineyard Ways .................. 46
POETRY
CIRCLES

by David Ellis

after “Several Circles” by Vasily Kandinsky, 1926 (shown above)

Circles on a square black canvas.
Four right-angled edges corral
not several circles, but more than forty,
an early burst of Abstraction, rounded
g geometric forms, soft curves bending,
each reaching for its own beginning,
going nowhere, scribing its circumference.

The artist is the hand that plays,
said Kandinsky, color is the keyboard.
Multicolored balloons then,
floating free in the festive air?

Bubbles of many different colors
rising to the water’s surface?

That dark background: colorless, lifeless.
A watery mirror of a night sky? Planets
and their moons circling in the dark?
Travelling the cosmos in their orbits,
spelling out some winter constellations?

But there is a massive black hole
near the center of this dark universe -
could it be slowly swallowing up
the other points of light? Choking down
stray astral architecture into the dark
maw of its awful gravitational forces?

Stars collapsing, turning to cosmic dust
and portending, in the way of the Universe,
an image of our own dark ends
when our vast Earth begins its
slow swallowing of us, taking us
from old age to dust?
Stamina has always been one of my strengths. I’ve never been a fast hiker, but I always held my own on long treks and was in it for the long haul. So, in March 2020, when I had shortness of breath on the slight incline on Mt. Vernon Street while walking home from Star Market, I was concerned. A day later at a nearby park, I again had shortness of breath and a sharp pain in my right shoulder. I was afraid it might be Covid and called Harvard Vanguard, but no test was suggested. A medically-wise friend suggested an OTC anti-histamine, Zyrtec. Both the shortness of breath and shoulder pain disappeared. My primary physician approved Zyrtec until the first frost. I felt I’d been given a profound reprieve.

But two weeks ago I had to stop on the incline on Mt. Vernon Street again. On Friday, September 25, I contacted my PCP, Dr. Tatiana Slavsky; her nurse responded, urging me to make an appointment if it got worse. Two days later my husband Chris, our new dog, Emma, and I went to Menotomy Park to walk on the lovely flat paths. I got out of breath trying to keep up with them. This wasn’t me.

I made an appointment Monday morning to see Dr. Perlo at 2 p.m. in Urgent Care at Harvard Vanguard in Somerville since Dr. Slavsky was fully booked. A somewhat awkward assistant hooked me up for an Electrocardiogram (EKG), and Dr. Perlo interpreted it. He voiced concern about my low heart rate (49) and recommended that I go to Mt. Auburn Hospital for more extensive cardiac testing. He didn’t think it was necessary to call an ambulance but urged us to drive to the Emergency Department (ED). Chris and I agreed on a quick detour to our home to pick up toothbrush, underwear, computer, chargers, prescriptions and journals, in case I had to stay overnight. We’d learned from past experience...

When I was finally assigned Examination Room 5 in the ED, Chris was permitted to join me. I told my shortness of breath story once again. They
took my vitals: my blood pressure reflected the “white coat syndrome”...higher than usual, probably due to the stress of being in a hospital. They administered another EKG with ease since the earlier one wasn’t accessible to them. They too were concerned about the low heart rate. My heart was beating half the usual number of beats. Words like “double block” or “full double block” kept coming up. Finally the attending doctor announced, “We’re going to admit you so we can monitor what’s going on with your heart.” Immediately he insisted that they put on the square white “paddles” or “pads”...one on my left side, the other on the right. I believe they had a red marking in the center. I had no idea what they were for. They rolled me on a gurney to Stanton 6, Room 651, a cardiac floor. Amber, the youthful and knowledgeable head nurse, greeted me warmly.

I had a private room and bathroom with a window facing out to a brick building. I put on the navy blue hospital gown (such an oxymoron) that tied in the back and kept my summer long pants on. Chris helped me get comfortable and then left to pick up some sandwiches for dinner and flowers for my room.

The steady stream of doctors, nurses and nursing assistants began. Most to “take my vitals” – pulse, blood pressure, and oxygenation of my blood. One inserted an IV in my left arm at the inner elbow area; others withdrew blood from my left hand to fill small vials...one, two, three. I’m always amazed that the blood just keeps coming out to fill the necessary number. One injection of Heparin in my abdomen, a blood thinner to protect me from clotting. Another to follow in 12 hours.

Many were curious about my baby blue cast on my right wrist. How could I be in the hospital with my arm in a cast? Last week I’d had a CT scan of my head at Kenmore to be sure there wasn’t any damage from my fall on the tennis court.

Chris and I shared a cranberry-chicken-lettuce wrap while we watched our daily PBS NewsHour. Routines help in these moments. He left at 8 p.m. and planned to be back at noon. I promised to call him at least once before bedtime. I knew I’d want to hear his comforting voice before I went to sleep.

Shortly after he left, two younger doctors from the cardiac team came into my room and introduced themselves. Dr. Choury, a 3rd year resident, was the more engaging one. They began talking about the likelihood of my needing a pacemaker. Again I reiterated that I wanted to hear about all options before making a decision. They reported that the head cardiac surgeon, Dr. Betu Phillips, was available tomorrow to do the procedure. Amber had spoken highly of Dr. Phillips.

Then they changed their tone. “We have two questions that we need to ask you and that you need to answer. They both relate to the possibility of your heart stopping during the night. If that happens, do you give permission for us to take physical means with CPR to stimulate your heart?”

“Yes.”

“Do you give permission to us to use the defibrillator next to your bed to give your heart a shock to start it beating again?”

“Yes.”

“Do you give us permission to intubate your lungs if necessary to get air into them for you to breathe?”

“Yes.” I again uttered. “Whatever you need to do to keep me alive.”

Yet I still had questions. “How does the defibrillator work?”

Dr. Choury smiled and answered. “The two white “paddles” that are attached to your chest are where the defibrillator would connect. They’re in place so there’d be no lapse in time if an emergency happened.”

They were very patient, answering all my questions and seeming to understand that I wouldn’t agree to any procedure, even theoretically, until I talked directly with the surgeon. That would happen tomorrow.

They left. My vital signs were again taken. I always asked what they were, and the nurse always told me. My blood pressure was much higher than usual, 160+ over 60+. My oxygenation remained good in the 90s. But my heart
rate was now in the low 40s. They would be monitoring it closely from the nursing desk throughout the night. They didn’t want it to go below 35.

After those vital readings, I was left with a strong thought that I wanted to be sure to get through the night. I never decided consciously to stay awake all night, but I had a sense that I would probably just be resting. I wrote a long letter to Chris and my son Carter, including the following instructions, which I’d never put down on paper:

“...But Chris and Carter, if I die here tonight or soon, I want you to know how much I love you. I want you to share with our families how much I love each person (I named each family member.) I want to be cremated with my ashes split between Chris on the east coast and Carter and Diane on the west coast. On the east I’d like them buried near the sea in a garden filled with green and flowers. On the west coast I’d like them taken out beyond the waves at Little Dume by Carter, Brett and Kai.

I was lying on my back with my hands open at my side. At one point, it felt like someone was holding my right hand. I even opened my eyes to see if someone was there. It felt like the soft flesh of a human hand.

The night nurse came in several times to check on me; my heart rate was now consistently in the low to middle 30s...33...35...

Through the night, I found deep comfort in songs that I knew by heart. I’d think of one song that I liked to sing --folk music, Broadway musical, pop, camp, spiritual -- and that song would lead me to another, and then another. *If I Loved You, You’ll Never Walk Alone, Wouldn’t it be Loverly? Some Enchanted Evening, Climb Every Mountain, Swing Low, How Great Thou Art, It’s a Pleasure to Know You. Farthest Field* stunned me; *Pack up Your Sorrows* made me feel lighter. The songs kept coming, calming and comforting. They kept me company through this long dark night. I didn’t feel scared, but I didn’t want to go to sleep because I knew heart rates drop in sleep. I thought for a long time about this moment, knowing I wasn’t ready to finish my life, knowing I didn’t want to die now, yet, at one moment, accepting that possibility if it had to happen now.

At around 5 a.m., Martha, the night nurse, came running into my room, saying, “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, just resting.”

“Are you dizzy or feeling faint?”

“No. Just not able to sleep.”

“Oh, thank goodness. The monitor went off when your heart rate hit 25.”

I could hardly speak. “Thanks, Martha. I saw you running in. I’m fine.”

Soon the hospital routines began, and Martha came back to take my vitals. I knew I had made it through the night alive.

_How grateful I am to greet this morning._

The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.

Don’t go back to sleep.

You must ask for what you really want.

Don’t go back to sleep.

People are going back and forth across the doorsill where the two worlds touch.

The door is round and open.

Don’t go back to sleep.

- Jelaluddin Rumi

As interpreted by Coleman Barks
No one can choose her ancestors, but if I could, I’d add an extra dose of DNA to my own gene pool from my great-grandfather, Junius Wilson MacMurray. Though his life was short, from 1843 to 1898, it was full and useful. I admire his moral compass, his sense of service, his love of family, and his unquenchable curiosity.

He was born in St. Louis, son of the owner of a prosperous iron foundry. Like most local well-to-do families, the MacMurrays lived on a plantation outside the city, and owned enslaved people. According to family legend, when Junius was born, he was “given” a new-born enslaved boy, to be his lifelong servant and companion. The two little boys were inseparable, roaming the woods and fields, and when Junius contracted smallpox, his enslaved “mother” wrapped his hands in bacon fat. The theory was that the grease would help heal the sores, and keep them from itching. In later life, he was proud that because of her care, he emerged unmarked from the disease.

Missouri was a border state between the north and south, and as tensions grew during the 1850’s, no one could predict which side she would choose. Junius helped answer the question in April of 1861, shortly before his eighteenth birthday.

He was a cadet in the student army corps, and right after the fall of Fort Sumter, he persuaded many of his class to join him in guarding the federal arsenal in St. Louis, lest the Confederates capture the large store of weapons and ammunition. Though his family was staunchly for the south, Junius followed his own principles and chose the anti-slavery side, to the deep distress of his parents. His choice was probably influenced by a recent incident: a neighbor of his parents was angry about Junius stealing apples. Unable to punish Junius himself, the neighbor thrashed his enslaved “brother,” and the injustice of slavery was made painfully and personally clear. The cadets, inspired by Junius’ oratory, saved the arsenal for the north. And on April 20, 1861, he and his classmates were sworn in as officers in the U.S. Army. A photograph of him taken in October of 1862 shows a slim nineteen-year-old in uniform, with a lush mustache and small goatee, dark hair, and brown eyes that look a bit surprised at where he found himself.

By the end of the war, he had participated in thirty-four actions, battles and skirmishes, including the crucial fall of Vicksburg, and was commended several times for bravery in the field. At the surrender of Vicksburg, it was Junius’ battery that was invited to command the ceremony. However, in that campaign he had received a wound that gave him pain for the rest of his life, and contracted yellow fever so badly he was nearly declared dead.

In November, 1865, Junius was mustered out of the army. Presumably he had decided there was no future for him back in Missouri, as within three months he enlisted once again, and was soon made a second lieutenant. It was a brave move on his part, because the post-war army was swollen with officers, many of them with the connections that came with a degree from West Point. Still, his education as a civil engineer soon brought him teaching assignments at the University of Missouri, Cornell, and finally, Union College. At a wedding in upstate New York, he met Henrietta VanAntwerp, a slim and popular belle, the daughter of a bank president in Albany. Soon he was taking the long trip from Ithaca to Albany on a regular basis, and they were married on October 1, 1873.

For the next twenty-five years, they lived the spartan life of army families, primarily in the west and northwest of this country. For Henrietta, a dusty little house in a fort on the prairie must have seemed far from the drawing rooms of Albany, but fairly quickly she was absorbed in the raising of children. Their first, VanAntwerp, died in infancy, but then Edna, Ethel and John filled out the family. John, known as Jack, was my grandfather, and became a diplomat. I have a photograph of Junius and Henrietta sitting with their two younger chil-
dren while the oldest, Edna, played the piano. They are all listening intently, and clearly the parents were determined to bring culture along, wherever they lived. Another picture shows Henrietta serving tea on her porch, one of several porches stretching along the row of army houses. Several neighborhood kids had joined the party.

Family ties among these MacMurrays were very strong, perhaps because Junius had largely lost contact with his own St. Louis relatives. While away on army business, he wrote often to his “Nettie,” sharing his experiences and asking for news of “my little people.” He spent hours with his children, teaching them about the classics, and introducing them to the natural world around them. History must have been on the curriculum as well, since during his college teaching days he had written a voluminous account of early settlement in the Mohawk Valley. Henrietta was a fine artist, and must have taught them painting and drawing. In later years, after Junius’ death, Henrietta and the two girls wrote to Jack frequently on his assignments in foreign capitals. He responded faithfully, often writing on postcards of his own splendid photographs, detailing daily life wherever he was posted.

After the war, Junius helped support his mother from his meager army salary, so they were not totally estranged. But there are records, after his death in 1898, of his brother suing Junius’ heirs over how the much-reduced family inheritance had been divided. On a happier note, Junius helped his former enslaved “brother” after the war to set up a shoe-blacking business, and the two had at least one happy reunion on one of his trips to St. Louis.

But back to his career. After his re-enlistment into the army in February, 1866, Junius’ career was largely spent on the western plains, protecting the settlers spilling insistently into the area, and trying to reach a fair arrangement with the American Indians who had lived and hunted there for generations. But even before his re-enlistment, he was assigned to the Powder River Expedition of 1865, from June to November of 1865.

He was in charge of scouts and reconnaissance, and wrote a remarkable letter on September 20 of that year describing to a friend a battle with Sioux, Cheyenne and Arapahoe American Indians near the Yellowstone River. “We were attacked by between three and four thousand and fought them for five hours before the death of one of their chiefs caused them to withdraw……The engagement was beautiful; among us and on the plain and on the hills around us…the red fiends rode at a full run, raining bullets and arrows upon us. The warriors wore United States uniform jackets, trimmed with (patterns) of diamonds, moons and squares, and buckskins trimmed with porcupine quills. Almost all wore streamers of eagle feathers…they rode as I have never seen men ride, horse and rider seemed as one, and they went with the very speed of the wind here, there and everywhere….Grand and glorious the sight, as from bush and hollow hitherto unseen enemies rushed upon us, clad gorgeously, their horses painted with stripes of black and red, the just-risen sun glowing upon them (with) a mass of light.”

This account is typical of Junius in its close and sometimes poetic descriptions, but also seems odd in its detachment and apparent lack of fear. The army soldiers’ survival in a battle with Indians was by no means certain; eleven years later, Custer and his men would be massacred not far away. And the troubles for Junius’ men were by no means over: before reaching their destination they had to march for many days across parched and treeless plains, surviving on pieces of fried cactus. Junius, predictably, took careful notes of fossils and minerals along that dangerous journey.

Over the years, Junius’ opinion of the plains people, whom he called “red fiends” on first sight, grew to deep respect, and even affection. He learned their languages, and was sent on several important missions of peace-making. His name is on the official U.S. Army map (1881) of the Columbia River basin. According to Richard Scheurman, a scholar of the Pacific Northwest, Junius was “significantly responsible for arranging applications for title to many properties along the Columbia and Snake rivers under the terms of the Homestead Act of 1862…This work did not endear him to many of his contemporaries, but thanks
to his selfless service much of this land remains today under American Indian ownership and surely would have been lost to them otherwise.” They trusted him, and he trusted them. He took his little daughter Edna into American Indian camps on the front of his saddle, consigning her to the care of the American Indian women during his meetings. I remember Aunt Eddie telling me, nearly a hundred years later, that she could still feel the slippery pieces of fish in her hands at the communal trough where small American Indians had their midday meal.

Most importantly, Junius respected the American Indians’ culture, and was determined to help preserve it in the face of white people’s encroachments. He and Henrietta gradually acquired a significant collection of native artwork, which Henrietta gave to the American Museum of Natural History after his death. Twenty years ago, I was given a tour of the collection by one of the curators, and held in my hands the amazing pieces of beadwork, pottery, weaving and feathers that had so fascinated my great-grandparents. I felt proud, and very close to them.

At the end of his career, Junius (now a major) contracted yellow fever in Florida, and stayed there several months to help contain it before seeking care in New York, where he died in May, 1898. Henrietta survived him by thirty years.

By Valarie Pratt Poitier

The art exhibits this work was created for cover 400 years of African American History in Cloth. My connection with it began with a response to an email with a Call for Entry listing 90 or so prompts. Many were quickly chosen. From the remaining topics I selected: “In 1653 Enslaved African and American Indian workers built a wall across Manhattan Island to protect the Dutch colony from British invasion. The site of the wall is now Wall Street.”

And then I thought how in the world was I going to depict this story in cloth? I began my research using New York’s online library resources. To my surprise there were so many details I had never read. One of earliest European “first contact” with this area of land and indigenous people of that area occurred around 1609. The events depicted in the artwork occurred about 40-50 years later. My research expanded from casual searching here and there to
months of deep diving into some of the earliest recorded documents. Findings included many references to slavery, human trafficking or as they were more likely to refer to as, exporting and importing cargo by ship. New York City’s online library resources have data and images that I never heard of or had access to during my years of formal education or the next 25 years.

In the good old days, one could go to the Philadelphia Free Library’s Print and Picture Collection or under close supervision access items from the rare book collection. There was also a very comprehensive microfiche area. For this project most of my research, Pre-Covid 19 happened online and at Middlesex County libraries here in Massachusetts. Sifting through the findings was a harsh experience that kept me off kilter, and uneasy throughout the entire process.

The resources available were from the newspaper clippings and prints originally stored in far flung places on microfiche, are now available online. They include ship captain logs, personal diary excerpts, wills and deeds and the actual meeting minutes of the West India Company representatives and colony affiliates. There are even lists of the different ethnic groups from around the globe being admitted, refused entry and the ability to set up a business or religious facilities.

In the 1600’s distinguished people did not open certain businesses in the residential areas in either European towns or their foreign colonies. There were areas and places for lawyers, butchers, the iron workers, fish mongers, foundries, the tannery, and the sale of livestock. However, in the 1600’s the enslaved people more often than not lived and worked with their owners in the colony.

I was constantly surprised when facts, my scissors, needles, and thread worked together, or not. This story quilt began to unfold in sketches and notes, they seemed to realign themselves without my conscious help. The only interference was my anger which regularly got incited, and I had to walk away and take a few deep breaths after reading or viewing some of the source materials. There was a constant yearning to hit something or rip something. Finally giving in to the feeling, my fabric stash literally caught the raw edge of the deal. Ripping the fabric end to end generally eased my distress.

The days began with the ripped inch wide strips being sewn together by color and value, with no clear idea where I was headed. But the muse was upon me. After years of trying to ignore it, I learned to go with the flow, as usual it did not change course or release its hold. When stitching it felt like I was simultaneously inside and outside of the wall, building the story. Evenings ended with more ripping to expel some of the horribleness I had seen. Calmed, what followed was the gentle laying out of bits and pieces to stitch by morning’s light. This process enabled a restorative ebb and flow of energy.

Midway through sewing the strips while working on the wall made of trees, that first bend appeared, when a strip dropped or maybe leaped out of my hand. As it fell, a vision came to me of the wall shifting into the slaves leaning into, no, actually morphing into each other and yet at the same time maintaining the relationship of being part of the wall; later the bending at the knees happened as another piece slipped through my fingers and landed just about where knees would bend in place of those long trunks. It took some time to figure out how to layer the fence or wall and not lose the people. Using a different set of pieced strips which turned into the background and faces, a town, a ship, the sky and even water emerged. I was stumped for a while trying to figure out how to add texture layering the fabrics yet leave room for the stitching, I veered away from traditional stitching and again surrendered, and the muse had its way. I began stitching what came to me without second guessing the process.

The heads and faces of transported Africans, Arabs, and Indigenous people, were spontaneously hand cut and attached to a foundation piece using a set of zigzag stitches. The same process was used to make the necks and hair when adding them to the background fabric. The best place to put them was between that soft blue sky, the land and the strong blend of colors which made up the wall. It worked but I wanted a stronger statement. That happened when metal chains were stitched around their necks, then linking them together.
across the 50-inch width of the quilt. Adding the chains, you may have to look
twice to see them. This connects the bankers, insurance companies and inves-
tors’ involvement in the enslavement of Africans and how early in our history
the tentacles, morals and roots of Wall Street were connected.

Other appliques included making a replica of a 1600’s Dutch ship using
brown strips, with black silhouettes adorned with hair and features, a nudge
that this was a vessel that transported Africans, other livestock and supplies for
the colony. There is a small vignette of British soldiers marching across the land
around the approximate date stitched in the upper right corner, representing
the threat the British soldiers posed.

On the bottom left there is a fair-sized applique of the Dutch town. The
town was built by those in league, collaborating with, or beholden as inden-
tured servants to the inhabitants or West India Company, and enslaved Indi-
ans, according to the records. There are records of exactly who else were in the
Neit Amsterdam colony during the Dutch occupation. They noted that many
of the enslaved American Indians who caused trouble or refused to work were
shipped to the Caribbean. They also noted nationalities, church affiliations that
would surprise you. There were lists of trades and businesses, the addresses of
properties revealed their status of granted, leased, or purchased. Another list
detailed what was owned, owed, complaints made, all had been collected and
maintained by the colonies ruling representatives of the West India Company.

It was remarkable to read about the first enslaved Africans who were
recorded in the town records by name. They had Portuguese names and spoke
that language, there were also skilled craftsmen. So how did they get there? A
Portuguese ship had been pirated by a West India Company ship. Oh, I wished
at that time I could have had access to the actual Dutch historical records in
Holland, that I could not find, of that voyage. Or had access to that informa-
tion from a source in England.

What made the Neit Amsterdam acquisition, soon to be known as New
York, unusual was that the town and the British worked out an agreement that
left the towns people with their property and other holdings intact. There was
no fighting, the town was not destroyed, and lives were not lost. This was very
rare if not the only such instance by the British in those particular days. There
was also a Dutch ship in port around the end of the negotiations which had
over one hundred enslaved people on it. They were unloaded and the Dutch
soldiers and many of the West India’s representatives boarded ship and sailed
off.

It boggles my mind that Africans were not legally freed until my great
grandparents were children. And even more problematic is that my greatgrand-
children are still not afforded equal rights and protection under the law or by
various governing bodies across the country as others who have come here
over the last hundred years or even yesterday. I guess it’s time to rip more fab-
ric and get back to my sewing machine. What a conundrum.
BERTHA AND I

By Polly Ann Tausch

Titanium Bertha moved into my life on the 10th of May, and she’s ended up being quite the addition. I have to admit, she was a bit cranky at first, but that all mellowed out when we began our early morning walks in early June. We took it slow, just around Quail Run Loop at first. Then we branched out and roamed on down Quail Run Drive as well. We pushed it until we made a mile walk and then came home and celebrated our achievement. Did we treat ourselves to French Toast or was it bacon and eggs? I’m not sure, but a celebration we had.

It’s not that I was in such great shape myself, but Bertha was really a novice. I taught her several exercises that increased her flexibility and strength, and that helped immensely. Soon we surpassed our mile walk and roamed through another long loop on Tramway Terrace and down Quail Run Court. This two mile trek was such an achievement, of course we celebrated with ice cream. I mean, after all, this was big stuff for us, and we’d earned it, hadn’t we?

Early morning walks in the New Mexico summer start around 6:00, when the temps are still in the sixties. I grab my fanny pack and sweat shirt, and off we go. Bertha always reminds me to toss my neighbor’s paper into their patio before we take off down the empty street. Empty? Hardly. Little bunnies play everywhere, scampering across the street, zipping after each other, under and through the bushes. Sometimes a deer roams by, or more likely just stops and stares for a while. I usually respond with a quiet “hello” and look back, until leisurely she ambles back through the trees.

Occasionally we have to stop and stand at attention, as the king of the neighborhood - the roadrunner – zips by. What intention and determination! He runs at a speed far surpassing the 15 mph speed limit, right down the entire block, holding grandiosely to the middle of the street. We don’t dare argue, but give him a silent salute as he speeds on by.

You develop camaraderie with people out walking this early. The white-haired guy with his two standard poodles that pull him helplessly along, always gives a cheery and somewhat breathless hello. The young boy who runs by, obviously training for track in his future Olympics, never fails to share a shy wave. The guy who soars up and down the streets on his bike shouts out a robust morning hello.

I met Tom, a retired landscaper, who fly-fishes at an 11,000 foot lake near Platoro, Colorado. The little town, open only June-September, has a lodge and small cabins I’ve already explored online and discovered it’s likely a perfect place for a writing retreat next summer. Yes, they do have electricity, but not much else. Sounds like my kind of get-away.

Then there’s Kevin, sporting his own Titanium Twins, who recognized Bertha right off and came over to make our acquaintance. His little dog, Zoey, is adorable. They took me home and showed me their beautiful garden. Kevin’s a Master Gardener, now on call for my plant ailments.

Everyone here greets you, and even the few car drivers wave. It’s a lovely place to live. Easy going, friendly, and beautiful. How can Bertha and I ask for more?

Bertha’s been spending time building up strength in her quads and those other climbing muscles whose names I can’t recall, and now we roam up the mountain - up to Laurel and Marigold Loops. Here the lots are large and houses set far back, so it’s more of a walk in nature. I’m the only one out here, so it’s a quiet, meditative escape. This morning, on my way back down, I counted eleven balloons sailing across the sky, way across the Rio Grande Valley to the west.

Now that summer has ended, Bertha and I often walk in the afternoon or early evening. The walkers are different - mainly working people and young adults with small children. Everyone says hello and exchanges a word or two, but the special connection I had with the early crowd is missing. I still love to watch the mountains turn their Magic Hour Red as the sun goes down, but the walking experience is a different kind.
But though I miss my special summertime friends, the change in seasons is bringing other life modifications that should fill, and even liven-up, my life. Would you believe Bertha is urging me to get back in the swimming pool? She’s even had me reserve lanes so we’ll actually go and swim laps. That gal’s determined to perfect a scissors kick she’s been unable to do for several years, and I work to coax her muscles stronger. Then last week, to my utter surprise, she up and goads me into asking a neighbor if we can try out her bike - just to see if we can still manage to ride one. Oh yes, change is in the air. Bertha, my demanding, new titanium knee, seems to be changing my life. Heavens, who knows what she has in store for me next?

When David and I get together, it is usually only for an hour or two. Sometimes he seems really excited to see me and other times, not so much. There are times when he looks past me as he only has eyes for another woman across the room. But if I play along with him, and do the things he wants to do—play music or dance, he forgets about that other woman, and focuses on our time together. David is one attractive guy. Besides his round apple cheeks, his sun-shiney yellow-blond hair, and his amazing blue eyes, he has killer dimples. Well, there is also his belly laugh. There is nothing better or more attractive than a dude with a sense of humor. David is such an appreciative audience of my simplest forms of entertainment.

My friend David just turned one in August and I am one of a handful of “David’s Angels”. David has had quite the life in a little over a year, and I wonder if he will recall, even at a visceral level, memories of his first few months. David was born in Kyiv, Ukraine. His Mom and Dad and his grandparents, had a family business in Kyiv. That was until his city, his country, his world was invaded and upended. David was just six months old. His Mom, Elena, doesn’t talk a lot about those early months, except to share that she and David left Kyiv and went to Poland, leaving his Dad, Sergi, to try to manage the family business as well as defend his country in the military. From March until June, David and Elena lived in Poland, but conditions there were not ideal. This past June, they arrived in Reading, Massachusetts.

The story of how David and Elena ended up in a suburban town north of Boston, far away from their home and their loved ones began in 2001, when Elena, as a child of Chernobyl, came for a visit to the United States for a month during the summer. She and several other children were sponsored by families in Reading through the Children of Chernobyl Project (CCP). Elena spent the month hosted by Linda and Walt and their children. Elena could read some
English, but was not fluent enough to speak it. The purpose of the trip was to give children who were living in towns abutting Chernobyl and exposed to unhealthy levels of radiation, an opportunity to get away and experience life in America. Elena, along with the other children went to amusement parks, beaches, pools, museums, shopping malls, movie theaters, and restaurants. They visited local libraries, post offices, police and fire stations. Doctors offered their services in emergencies and two local dentists provided much needed dental care for the children.

Over the past twenty years, Elena has stayed in touch with her host family, and Linda and Walt generously offered their home to Elena and her infant child so that they could ride out the war safely. They arrived in Reading in June. Late in the summer, Linda asked for volunteers within the Reading Neighbors Network, to come and spend time with David, so that she and her husband, and Elena, could have time to continue working at their respective jobs, and have a bit of respite from the care of an active one year old.

So back to David and me. My favorite stage of parenthood and grandparenthood is toddlerhood. Since my grandchildren are well beyond that age, I jumped at the chance to play with a one year old. Toddlers’ little brains are like mini-computers that absorb data from their environment. I find the way in which they learn fascinating. The fact that they have no fear, are completely egocentric, and find joy in the simplest things entices me. When I first met David, he had just had his first birthday. His little toyroom (a piano room converted to a playroom) was full of toys, from talking toys to balls to music-playing toys to push carts. David was wary of me, as he associates new people with his mother leaving. He gave me the eye (maybe a bit of a stink eye) and then pointed at me. His very sweet Mama told him it wasn’t polite to point at people. “Pointing is great. It shows joint attention.” I said to Elena (or perhaps more to myself).

Most people wouldn’t know the term “joint attention”. I only understand this because I know that it is an important milestone in childhood development, and my seven year old grandson with Autism, has not yet developed this skill. Joint attention is a way of a child saying to another person, “Look at this with me. I want to share this fascinating experience with you.”

After the first few minutes of David surveying me, and deciding I might be someone he would like to hang out with, he and I stacked cups for about a million times, and each time he knocked down the cups was more exciting the the previous time. David then requested my hand so that he and I could cruise around the house. Because others in the house were on work Zoom calls, I needed to try and keep him fairly contained and quiet. David wasn’t going to have it, until I found a blue recycle box full of papers and tossed out mail. There is nothing better than ripping up paper and throwing it around the room when you are a one year old.

My hours with David go pretty much the same each time I visit. He casts a suspicious eye upon me, then remembers that I am there to entertain him, and then lets me into his world of cup stacking, ball rolling, dancing, vroom-vrooming his cars and trucks, and now walking all by himself. These games are all accompanied by smiles and giggles. When he gets tired, Elena lets him watch a short video. Elena, like all first-time Mom’s, worries about too much screen time. Once the video ends, David is off and toddling, and looking for a new adventure. Adventures abound in a house with two very patient cats, rooms off of rooms, and toys upon toys.

I have lots of questions for Elena that I am hesitant to ask. I assume that she will tell me more about her life when she is ready to share. Elena is beautiful and calm and disarmingly appreciative of my time with David. I see a lot of her in David. She is a model mother—snuggly, comforting, and ever present, even when she is trying to work. She tells me that she can Facetime with Sergi when he isn’t out on a mission. The last few weeks have been difficult for her, particularly a couple of weeks ago when Russia launched another aggressive attack on Kyiv. Linda tells me that when Sergi calls, he can only speak for a minute to
confirm that he is okay. He hasn’t been able to go into the city to confirm that their condo is intact.

I cannot imagine being a new mother and being separated from my family, thousands of miles away with a baby. I also cannot imagine myself and my husband taking in a young mother and her baby for an undetermined amount of time while they “ride out the war”. When Linda and Walt committed to taking in Elena and David, did they have any idea how long the war would last? I think about the impact on David of being uprooted from his home, away from his Daddy and grandparents at a time in his life when attaching to his caregivers and feeling stability is so critical. David is one of many children, perhaps not as fortunate to have a clean, safe, secure place to sleep and to play.

If I think beyond David and Elena, and all of the families who are suffering as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, or all of the injustices in the world towards children, I feel overwhelmed and angry. This feeling is not dissimilar to feelings I have when I look beyond my grandchild’s seventh year into his future and beyond. He has not begun to come close to mastering some of the social skills that come so naturally to David at just a few months past one year. So instead of dwelling on David and Elena’s future, or my grandson’s future, I go and play. I delight in David’s squeals and whimsy. We stack cups, we throw balls, we pull the cats’ ears and tail. David and I don’t worry about tomorrow. David and I live for today for just an hour or so each week. Am I David’s Angel? I think it should be the reverse.

---

GROWING UP JEWISH – SORT OF
By Carol Agate

I wasn’t brought up with much thought, if any, given to religion. Being Jewish was more of an ethnicity than a religion, although as a child I wasn’t aware of the distinction. When I was nine or ten I first learned that Jews were a minority. I couldn’t understand that because everyone I knew was Jewish.

When I was thirteen my father decided I needed some Jewish education. In those days there were no bat mitzvahs; girls were confirmed. For confirmation we were each given a statement to read. I still remember the first sentence of mine: “Like those who stood at Horeb, we too acknowledge the power of the almighty.” But I was already questioning the idea of an almighty.

For my last year of high school my parents sent me to a boarding school. My father’s business was taking him all over the country and mother wanted to travel with him. In those days, before multiculturalism crept into everyone’s consciousness, the school admitted a few token Jews, but no other minorities. There were four of us, two in each dorm room tucked away in the same end of the hallway.

That’s when I learned about Christianity, beyond the Christmas carols public school students still sang. Everyone was required to attend church every week. I found this fascinating. Each week I went to a different church and the more I learned about religion the more strange I found it to be.

But I was aware of a certain sense of community in these churches, something that had never been a part of my life. My parents rarely attended synagogue. The idea of a community of like believers intrigued me. I wished there could be a church without god.

Some parents learned that their Protestant children were attending the Catholic church because if you didn’t stay for communion the services were shorter. When the parents complained to the school, students were told they had to go to a church of their own religion. I never questioned what church Jews were supposed to attend. When I look back on those days I marvel at my passivity. I
had quickly picked up that one just didn’t talk about being Jewish.

An incident of feeling like an outsider sticks in my memory. One December day in Spanish class we were handed a one-page document that we were asked to take turns translating. The first person started stammering, “it happened that . . .” and then she fluently said “And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus . . . .” Huh! She translated it as “It came to pass”? And how did she know the word “decree”? Then a few more people read fluently before it was my turn. It then occurred to me that this was something Christians knew by heart. When it was my turn and I gave the literal translations as best I could I heard the titters in the room.

In my freshman year of college a friend and I saw a poster for a camping weekend with the BCA, which we figured stood for Brown Camping Association. We were surprised that Friday night dinner started with a prayer. By the time the meal was over we realized BCA stood for Brown Christian Association. When camp was closing after the Sunday morning service that we didn’t attend, a classmate told us that our absence was noticed and someone had commented that we were probably Jews.

Because of my experience in boarding school I became fascinated with religion. I would have liked to major in religious studies, but by then I was a committed atheist and didn’t think I would be welcome in that major. Little did I realize that a lot of religious thought at the time was veering away from god concepts.

After graduation I got a job in an ad agency. By a funny coincidence it was Grey Advertising, the only major agency in New York with Jewish founders and mostly Jewish employees. I got a kick out of watching Mad Men that was set in the same time period I worked there. Don Draper was having an affair with a Jewish client. After they had a falling out I picked up a reference that she had taken her account to Grey.

Being at Grey, I was unaware of the anti-Semitism prevalent in the advertising world at the time. I realize now that it was the only major agency that wasn’t named for its founders. The name came from the gray walls of the partners’ first office. They undoubtedly didn’t think it was wise to use their own names.

I met my future husband at Grey and my father was relieved that, like my sisters, I married a Jew. My father had said he wouldn’t go to the wedding if any of his daughters married a non-Jew, but wasn’t put to the test. His resolve wasn’t tested until he said the same thing about his granddaughters, but after complaining he went to both of their weddings to non-Jews.

It took a long time before my daughter could legally marry, and my parents were no longer living. For the wedding she asked her father and me to say something about our parents. I said my mother would have had a problem with her marrying a woman but she would have come to love her wife as much as the rest of the family does. And my father . . . well, it would have been the first time he didn’t complain that one of his granddaughters was marrying a non-Jew. My nieces couldn’t stop laughing.
It’s 5:15 in the morning and I’m standing in the dark with a thousand of my closest friends. It’s Patriots Day 2022 morning and the thousand are ringing historic Lexington Green awaiting the annual re-enactment of the “Shot Heard ‘Round the World”.

Arriving in Lexington I find a spot in the Stop & Shop parking lot. I follow streams of people from nearby parking lots to hurry to “the Green” and, hopefully, find a reasonable viewing spot. Friends who years ago went to the re-enactment with their children said that it was a good idea to bring a step stool for the best view. I have my six-foot step ladder in my car but decide not be “that guy” blocking other peoples’ view, so I leave it behind in my car.

Approaching the Green, I am surprised to see so many people. I have been to the Green many times before but never on Patriots Day. The Green is completely ringed with people standing three-four deep everywhere. Somehow, I spot a small gap in the crowd along Bedford Street and am able to inch my way in behind a short family with small children. I am only a few feet away from the edge of the Green and, amazingly, I have a clear view of most of the Green. I’m thinking that I should be able to see the historical reenactment!

It’s surprising how quiet a large crowd can be in the dark. Everyone speaks quietly, almost reverentially. Little muffled conversations take place around me. Parents are trying to keep their snowsuit-clad children occupied with stories about what happened here 247 years ago and why it is important for them to pay attention. In the dark, most don’t. Adult couples joke back and forth about how crazy they are to be standing here, in the cold, in the dark. At least they will have a good story for later in the week.

Around me people are dressed for Winter. The thermometer in my car read 34° when I pulled in to the Stop & Shop parking lot. It won’t feel much better until the sun comes up. That’s right, the sun! It’s dark. I don’t remember seeing TV recaps of the event showing the reenactment in the dark. How much longer before the sun comes up? In the dark all you can see are shapes shifting back and forth trying to keep warm. This doesn’t seem right.

The faint glow in the sky to the East starts to increase. Now I can look around at my neighbors and see faces and attempts at hand warming. The lady standing next to me is standing on an overturned white, plastic bucket that she bought from an enterprising, entrepreneur two blocks away from the Green. She is happy for the boost and keeps her hand on her husband’s shoulder for balance. Once again, I am happy that I am six-feet tall. I think to my self that there are a lot of height-challenged people in Massachusetts. I could look over the heads of dozens of people to see where the reenactors would soon enter the Green and take their places.

With the dawning sun, the quiet air is broken by a flock of small, singing birds flitting from tree branch to tree branch. How can a dozen small birds make so much noise? Their energy is waking up the masses. Now people are looking at their neighbors and sharing friendly jokes about how they got here and their excitement on what’s about to happen. The Green is lighting up and I’m thinking that the sun will be completely up before the show starts.

Suddenly, a cannon goes off nearby startling everyone. It’s the signal of approaching Redcoats. Now it’s getting real! A group of about 30 Minutemen walk in to the center of the Green from multiple directions and form a crude formation. The reenactors are dressed in clothes like those that the real Minutemen would have probably worn the day before at their usual employment as farmers, shopkeepers, tailors or laborers. They are armed but they look like a motley crew, indeed.

There is a gasp in the crowd. From the far end of the Green, near, ironically, Lexington’s famous Minuteman statue, the British soldiers enter. They look spectacular! The two officers ride in on magnificent horses, leading rank upon rank of marching soldiers. At least a hundred highly disciplined Redcoats line up about 50 feet away from the Minutemen. Every one of us observers are now recording the sights on our phones and I later hear myself saying to no one in particular, “Now would be a good time to run away!” It is at this moment that
the many observers say how surprised they are at how close the Redcoats are to the Minutemen. How could anybody stand in front of a solid line of armed soldiers and await the impending fusillades? Just as history recorded, a shot comes from somewhere and all hell breaks loose. You see the puffs of white gunpowder smoke emerge from the muskets followed a microsecond later by the roar of guns. Bodies on both sides fall and the Redcoats charge the outnumbered Minutemen who then break ranks and run for their lives. The crowd gags as a Redcoat bayonets a fallen Minuteman. The Redcoats pause in their pursuit to stand and fire at the fleeing Minutemen. I lead a chorus of boos from the crowd as the reenactors in their Redcoats race by.

The British office in charge calls for his soldiers to stop chasing the “Traitors” and to re-group. The Redcoat soldiers run back to their formations. The fifes and drum players lead the troops away and, seemingly without a care in the world, they all march off down Massachusetts Avenue to continue on to Concord. I wonder if any of the original Redcoats realized what will follow from this “local skirmish.” The British formation marches past the fallen Minutemen as women in period costumes run past the soldiers to tend to their fallen family and friends.

The sounds of drum beats and marching men fade into the distance and it is over.

As I hurriedly walk back to my car to beat the crowds to the parking lot exits, I am shaken by what the reality of what just took place sinks in. Would I have had the nerve to stand in front of a professional army and dare them to take their best shot as I stood 50-feet away in plain sight? Would I fight to protect family and neighbors from a despotic regime? At best, I always saw myself as the guy standing behind a tree or a stonewall taking a shot from a distance and then running like Hell to fight another day.

Oh well, different times for different behaviors. At least, I hope that it is.

INTO THE WORLD OF DADS

By Rich Trakimas

Weekdays was when Dad took the car to go to work, leaving Mom with the kids for the day. Back in the mid-50’s most families we knew only had one car – the one that Dads used to get to work and back. But when the weekends came, that was the time for errands with Dad.

As a small boy, the world of Dads was a complete mystery. Where did Dad go when he “goes to work” and what does it really mean? Most weekdays Dad would kiss us goodbye as we ate our breakfast and he would reappear at dinner time. It would only be a short time before it was time for my sister and me to go to bed so time with Dad was brief.

But then the weekends came!

Remember when the stores were closed on Sundays (Thank you “Blue Laws”) and you had to cram your errands into Saturdays? This was the “me-time” with Dad that I remember. After breakfast, Dad would scoop me up and put me in the Chevy station wagon (no seat belts, of course) for our Saturday morning rounds.

I grew up in a small central Massachusetts mill town so “downtown” was my outside world. Here you could find (most) anything you could need in a few tight blocks. We would start off at the bank where Dad would talk with the tellers and bankers (how did he know everybody?). Money and papers would slide back and forth through the small opening at the bottom of a metal “window” that looked like a tiny jail cell. I wonder why they are locked up like that? I could only imagine what they must have done to be locked in. But Dad seemed to like them and they him so I guess everything was alright.

Across the street was the hardware store where you could get everything cool that a small boy could imagine. In addition to tool-stuff, they sold toys, bikes, electronics (transistor radios, for example), tires, and so much more. Thinking back, they must have had a storage bunker under their store to keep all
that stuff. “Yes, I’m sure we have one of those downstairs, I’ll be right back.” And a few moments later, like magic, Tony would come back upstairs with it. Of course, Dad knew everyone who worked in the store and somehow knew where to find all these screws and nails he’d pick up for his home projects.

Dad would talk with everyone who’d come in to do their Saturday hardware store errands. “Hi Albert, how’s the wife?” “Hey, John, what happened to your Buick the other day?” And it would repeat as more and more people came through. This would give me the perfect opportunity to wander the store unsupervised and touch stuff. Can you imagine what it meant to a little boy to touch stuff in a hardware store without worrying about “Get your hands off that! Don’t you know that it’s sharp, dangerous, “ikkky”, expensive(!)?” And yes, occasionally a screw or nail would accidentally fall into my pocket for later exploration.

And then the best part of the morning. “Come on Richie, let’s go to the diner.” (!). The diner in the center of town was one of those old railroad diner cars with a row of stools covered in shiny, red vinyl at the counter and a few tables lined up against the opposite wall. Dad would pick me up and put me on a stool next to him where I would have a good view of everything. Dad would order me a glass of chocolate milk and some buttered toast that I could work on while he talked with the cook and other customers. I loved just sitting there listening to “man-talk”. I would come to learn that, in these situations, seldom was anything substantial talked about. No one talked politics, unless it was town politics. Usually, it was about Boston sports teams and how this was the year that the Red Sox would finally win it all. (Unfortunately, Dad and Mom didn’t live long enough to see them finally win it all. But that’s another story.) Ah, man-talk. Jokes that I definitely shouldn’t have heard, rumors about neighbors that mostly didn’t make sense to me, and the latest on who died.

Sitting on that stool and hearing these stories was my first education into the world of Dads. I just knew that when I grew up that I would belong to the local bowling league, join the Elks, and go on Saturday errands with my own boys. What else would there be to do? Oh yeah, I’d probably have to “go to work” somewhere, too.

I struggle up the stairs to my garret studio clutching a big box of leftovers from my day’s work at the bakery in town where I landed a job several months ago. The Community Bakery, a mom and pop operation that specializes in delicious hand cut donuts, was the perfect job for me. I love donuts and, even on my meager income as an artist, I always begin my day with a cup of Joe and any one of a number of donuts on display. I have tried them all — jelly sticks oozing with raspberry jam, donuts with a crinkly glaze, and powdered sugar rings that linger on my lips after the last bite. My girl friend loves those the most for obvious reasons. I even enjoy the light and fluffy crullers and the assortment of donut holes carefully packaged in a cellophane bag near the cash register which I convince myself have fewer calories.

Tonight as my students begin to arrive for their first collage class, they find me working on my own creation as a demonstration of what the focus of tonight’s lesson will be. I grab a chocolate covered donut and smear it on the cardboard to make a night sky. I squeeze the raspberry jam from the jelly stick around the perimeter of the yet to be determined scene. As I sprinkle powered sugar over the night sky I tell them that winter is coming. After all, we’re in upstate New York. I then decide the crullers will make excellent tires on the truck that perhaps will be a snow plow. As I say this, I realize that everyone stares at me in disbelief.

I look back at each of them, smile, and ask them to have a seat around the table. They attempt to situate themselves on the stools that are clearly too small and uncomfortable for the chubby and rotund individuals we have all become thanks to our daily visits to Mom and Pops. That’s how I got to know everyone and why they signed up for my collage class when they discovered I was an artist.

Sheila looks directly at me and lets me know that this is not what she had in mind when she signed up for my class. Harold adds that he is horrified at the prospect of immersing his hands in jelly and creme and wonders how this could be considered art. Janice is uncomfortable wasting perfectly good
food that they could enjoy as refreshment. Howard adds that Mom and Pop would be shocked if they knew what Jake was doing with their generous gift of leftovers. Gertrude says the aroma from the donuts is so overpowering for her that she can’t imagine doing anything until she has something to eat. However, she admits these once delicious donuts have suddenly lost their appeal.

I continue to work, totally engrossed in my art making, to the consternation of my students. It is Gertrude’s comment that resonates with me the most though and, when I look up from my work, I can’t help but agree with her.

“You’re right Gertrude. When I see these beautifully crafted donuts as the raw material for my art, they lose their appeal as food. And I need for this to happen because I can’t go on like this. After huffing and puffing up my stairs every night, not to mention looking at myself in the mirror, I decided I need to do something about the state I am in and I can’t quit my job.”

I notice an uncomfortable silence in the studio. Sheila’s fleshy cheeks redden. Harold attempts to hide his pot belly beneath his arms. Howard tries to disguise his paunch and Janice holds her head in her chubby ring-fingered hands. One by one, they silently wobble out the door, teeter down the stairs and slam the door behind them.

I shrug my shoulders and return to my collage convinced that, while I may very well have lost some friends, I have found a possible solution to my problem. Tomorrow morning I will even give my latest piece of art work to Mom and Pop.

---

MR. BIRGE

By Laura Brooks

When I think about all the teachers I’ve had in my life time (from kindergarten through graduate school), there are only a few who really stand out. One of those is Mr. Birge, my sixth-grade teacher. I adored him. Was it his passion for teaching, his creativity, my feelings seen by him? I’m really not sure, but I think it must have been a combination of the three.

One thing that I’ll never forget was his love of music. He decided to teach us something about classical music, and he would put records on the record player at the back of the classroom. He played Beethoven, Bach, and Mozart. Actually, I’m just guessing because I really don’t remember which composers’ music he played. He talked to us about the differences between the composers and what the music was trying to communicate. This went right over my head. But his enthusiasm was unforgettable. While the music played, he would walk around the room, eyes closed, conducting with an invisible baton. And, I certainly can’t forget his professed love of Roger Voisin, a trumpeter for the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Boston Pops, whom I later learned was this country’s best-known trumpeter. My classmates and I decided to throw Mr. Birge a surprise birthday party, and we thought that Roger Voisin would be the perfect surprise guest. A parent of one of my classmates must have had a connection to the Boston Symphony Orchestra or the Boston Pops, whom I later learned was this country’s best-known trumpeter. My classmates and I decided to throw Mr. Birge a surprise birthday party, and we thought that Roger Voisin would be the perfect surprise guest. A parent of one of my classmates must have had a connection to the Boston Symphony Orchestra or the Boston Pops. I can see this classmate standing in one of the school’s offices with the phone pressed to his face attempting to get this invitation extended. Sadly, Roger Voisin wasn’t at the party, but I love that we tried. And what a testament to our devotion that we would have thought it possible and have done our best to make it happen.

Then there was Mr. Birge’s creativity. He told us that at some point during the school year each student was going to come to the front of the room and make a short speech on a topic that wouldn’t be revealed until that moment of being called on. I believe my topic was belts. This was not something I had experienced before, and being somewhat shy, I’m sure I was slightly horrified at the thought.
And imagine my pleasure at being the chosen one to accompany him (in his car) to the local Howard Johnson's to buy ice cream for the class. This must have been a reward for something which the class did well and which I have since forgotten.

About twenty-two years ago, I decided to organize a reunion of my sixth-grade class. Despite the fact that there were only 11 students in our class, I was very pleased that I managed to get ahold of all but one. And, thrill of thrills, guess who joined us? Mr. Birge! When I have shown photos of that night to friends, they haven’t been able to guess which person was Mr. Birge who was 16 years older than us.

Being a teacher myself and a fan of Mr. Birge’s, I was very pleased to have the opportunity (after the reunion) to sit in on a class of his (now in a different school) 32 years after being his student and experience his classroom from an adult advantage. My one memory of that visit was his telling his eighth-grade students that one was allowed to eat asparagus with their fingers. I'm not sure how that worked its way into the classroom talk!

I found out that Mr. Birge (at some point after teaching us) had been able to meet Roger Voisin. I also discovered that the reason that he taught us about classical music was that he didn’t think the school’s music teacher was doing a good job, so he took it upon himself to enlighten us.

I still have my copy of the book *The Yearling* by Marjorie Rawlings which Mr. Birge read aloud to us. I brought it to the reunion and had him inscribe it. He wrote, “To Laura, 32 years later, I love that you still love this special ‘sharing’ of ours. Walter Birge”

How lucky was I to be reunited all those years later, not only with my sixth-grade classmates, but one of my favorite teachers? And being a teacher myself, it’s wonderful to reflect on what contributes to lasting impressions.

---

**LOOKING FOR PEACH KUCHEN**

By Irene Hannigan

Much to my surprise, my recipe box is looking a lot like my Mom’s. I discovered this quite by accident one recent Saturday afternoon as I frantically searched for her Peach Kuchen recipe that I was planning to make for friends who were joining us for dinner that night. I visualized the yellow 3x5 index card in her smudged sketchy handwriting with an orange felt-tipped pen but when I looked behind the DESSERT tab, where I was sure it would be, I couldn’t find it. I did locate an extensive three-card recipe for a delicious Bavarian Almond Apple Torte that was my favorite dessert to make in the fall when apples were in season. My best recipes always came from my mother.

I then checked CAKES but again with no luck. Instead, I pulled out a tattered newspaper clipping for what must have been a promising recipe for spinach lasagna, which I realized I had never made. What was that doing in the CAKE section anyway? I wondered. I then discovered a haphazardly folded 4x6 index card for Charlie Bird’s Farro Salad, which I had been searching for a few days ago. What a hodgepodge I thought to myself as I struggled with the tightly packed recipes, dog-eared and discolored, that were sandwiched between the green tabbed dividers.

Still looking for Peach Kuchen, I then had a flashback to the day my mom nonchalantly gave me her recipe box and how excited I was to receive it much to her surprise. We were sitting in her kitchen and, despite her failing eyesight, she had insisted on making a hearty breakfast for me before my scheduled flight back to Boston.

“Oh, this is wonderful, Mom!” I said between bites of scrambled eggs, bacon, whole-wheat toast and coffee. Over the years we had shared many of our favorite recipes, each of us tucking them into the weekly letters we exchanged after I left home and was on my own. I loved seeing her familiar scrawl
and always appreciated the various tips she offered alongside the instructions. They reminded me of the days when we enjoyed cooking and baking together.

“I’ll bet a lot of the recipes are yours. You’ll spot them immediately because they’re in your best second-grade teacher print and encased in those plastic sleeves you used to buy to keep them clean. But maybe you’ll find a few new ones. I can’t see well enough anymore for them to be of much use to me and besides, didn’t you say you were going to make me an enlarged print cookbook of some my favorite recipes?”

“Definitely,” I replied, “I’ve already started.”

As I drove to the West Palm Beach Airport I knew that the recipe box would be my reading material on the flight home. After we reached our cruising altitude I pulled down the meal tray and placed the scruffy black plastic file box in front of me. As I rested my hands on top I pictured her hands, which looked remarkably like mine. On the surface her box looked a lot like mine, too. The size was the same and we had the same tabbed categories. It was only when I began to look within each category that I noticed a significant difference. Although she had dutifully placed the tabbed index cards in the box, which I had actually bought for her, it was clear that they served absolutely no purpose. As she considered alphabetical order to be just a suggested framework for organizing her phonebook, so too had she dismissed the need for categorizing her recipes.

Within APPETIZERS & DIPS I found Apple Crisp and Date Nut Bread. BISCUITS & BREAD contained Baklava and Baked Shrimp. Within CAKES & COOKIES I found Flounder Stuffed with Wild Rice and Cherry Blossom, a favorite childhood recipe. As I flipped through each section I realized there was no pattern to how she had stored her recipes but she, too, had a practice of ripping potentially promising ones out of newspapers and magazines. There were also lots of can labels and backs of boxes crammed between the plastic sleeves which added to the confusion. I found sketchy notes for Tony’s Marinara Sauce on a napkin and appreciated the significantly revised version she had once sent to me. I smiled as I shook my head in disbelief. This was a recipe box with personality—her artistic personality that was in stark contrast to mine, at least at that time.

Before I realized what I was doing, I had dumped out the entire box of recipes and one-by-one had re-filed them to my liking. In retrospect I often regretted my impulsive decision. Wouldn’t it have been more fun to have a visual reminder of my mom’s quirky ways? But lately, especially when my organizational scheme fails me, I’m glad I did. As I recall how often she used to phone me to ask me to send her a misplaced recipe, I now go to her tidy recipe box quite confident that I will find exactly what I’m looking for. That’s where I found Peach Kuchen that Saturday afternoon when the peaches were juicy and ripe. How I wish I could have thanked her.
THE REUNION PROJECT
By Lora Brody

When I received an invitation to attend my fiftieth high school reunion my immediate reaction was to throw it in the trash. The years 1961-1963 were a miserable time for me. I was none of the things that made me a ‘popular girl.’ In fact, I was essentially a social misfit. I wasn’t pretty, I wasn’t smart, and worst of all, I was an artist, thus considered a bottom feeder in a culture that valued conformity over all else. It was a lonely and confusing time.

However, at the time the invitation arrived, I was taking a photography course that required me to produce a portfolio of portraits for an exhibition later that year. With the germ of an idea, I dug out my high school yearbook and began flipping through the pages, paying most attention to the girls, most of whom were strangers to me then, and I imagined, would have very little in common with me now. I thought about the many ways in which I had changed and wondered how these women had changed as well. My artistic proclivities had translated into a successful career as both an author and a photographer. Fifty years ago, I couldn’t have imagined the person I was then becoming the person I am now.

Suddenly, going to the dreaded reunion took on a more positive spin. I wrote to the women in my class asking if they would consider letting me take their pictures at the reunion. Still wondering about how their perceptions of things past related to things present, I prepared a simple list of prompts that, I hoped, some of the women would answer sometime during the weekend event. The prompts invited the women to consider who they were in the early 1960’s and who they are now. Beginning with “Then I was...Now I am...,” and including ‘I used to think...Now I know...’ and ‘Family was...and Family is...’ I asked them to delve a little deeper into how the past fifty years had changed each of them.

Armed with my camera, lights, a backdrop, photo release forms and the fourteen prompts printed on a form that requested anonymous responses, I drove with my friend Debbie Sachs, whom I had roped into helping me, back to my hometown, hoping that something might come of the experiment.

The response from my classmates was far beyond anything I could have imagined. Thirty-eight of the forty women who attended the reunion let me take their pictures. Instead of drinking bad beer and doing the twist with their nearing 70-year-old male classmates, the women, armed with copies of the prompts, gathered in a nearby conference room, and began to talk. What followed was an inspiring conversation about our identities, then and now.

The Prom Queen, the most beautiful and talented one in our class said that on prom night she got pregnant and spent the next nine months ‘visiting her aunt’ in California. She gave her baby up for adoption and never had any more children. Then she told us that ten years ago her daughter had found her and now she had not only a child, but grandchildren as well.

Another talked about what it was like to be gay in 1961 and keep her secret hidden until she moved far away from home and came out to friends (but not family) who welcomed and embraced her true self.

For the first time, I told the story of flunking out of college my freshman year and in order to get back in, having to endure the embarrassment of taking remedial courses held in the basement of our old high school.
It was a weekend of tears, laughter, and embraces. I left feeling that not only had I truly connected to these women, but that I had given them a platform to tell truths that had stayed inside for too many years, and that my photo project was going to be something very special. I believe that that providing the opportunity to share anonymously made the women feel comfortable and safe and was the key to eliciting profound and beautiful responses.

Back home, I created diptychs of the portraits I had taken, matched with each woman’s yearbook picture, and made large format prints of each one. Debbie edited the prompts and their responses for repetition and clarity. They were printed on long scrolls that hung along with the diptychs. As promised no names were attached to either the words or the portraits. I left a notebook at the exhibition space so people could leave comments. Viewers wrote that it was an incredibly powerful experience to look at the pictures and read the words. “This made me cry,” several people wrote, and “Can you do this for my high school reunion (or women’s group)” was another. Thus, the Reunion Project came to be.

At first the participating groups were other reunions such as the Wellesley College Class of 1960, and a group of longtime friends who got together once a year during Women’s Week in Provincetown, Massachusetts. I traveled to Alabama for another group of friends, to Concordia, Kansas, for the jubilee celebration of Sisters of Saint Joseph, and to New Jersey for a meeting of women associated with a synagogue there.

These days my work mainly takes place locally at independent and assisted living facilities such as Goddard House in Brookline, Standish House in Dorchester, and Neville Place in Cambridge, as well as memory care units attached to those facilities. Women at Loomis Communities in South Hadley and The Overlook in Charlton have participated in the Reunion Project and while I have involved men once or twice, women remain my preferred audience. Images from the Brookline Senior Center were exhibited at the Brookline Main Library as well as Brookline Town Hall. With each opening the participants were honored with gala celebrations. Since 2013, Debbie and I have completed the Project 16 times. Even during Covid we managed, by working outside (at the Bridgewater Senior Center and Compass On The Bay in South Boston), to keep the project going. For me, nearing 80, it is a constant reminder that old age is not defined by the calendar, but by the energy that can be found by doing work that is exciting and fulfilling. This work connects me to senior women who, when given the opportunity to hone in on consistent life themes, such as family, work, close relationships, and enjoyable activities, tell us who they were and who they are. The portraits and words the Reunion Project produces add a rich dimension to the documentation of American women’s history over the past century.
VINEYARD DAYS, VINEYARD WAYS

By Pamela R. Giller

Any mention of Martha's Vineyard, and images of Lucy Vincent Beach float though my head. The delicate curve of its powdery sand, backed by dunes to nestle into; the turquoise water, gently lapping at the shore or vibrant with waves that swimmers from eight to eighty race to ride ashore; the mercurial lagoon, one summer tucked behind the dunes, the next flowing directly into the ocean.

We were eight in all, four of us and four Goodmans, with whom we shared a Vineyard rental. Hampered by the town of Chilmark’s limit of one beach pass per household, we squeezed into the Goodmans’ pumpkin-hued Volvo station wagon—two kids in the way back—for the short ride to Lucy V. Tumbling out of the sweltering car, we would rush to drape towels over the kids before they scampered away.

I see us trudging from the far end of the parking lot, laden with chairs, umbrellas, blankets; canvas bags stuffed with towels, sunscreen, band aids, books, beach toys in the early years; later we hauled rafts, Styrofoam boards, sometimes badminton equipment; always a cooler and a jug. Usually, we took the path across bristly beach grass. Occasionally we traversed the cliff. The kids rated the waves from that perch—“shrunken shrimps” they would groan or “awesome” they would cheer. Sighting the graceful beach, the beckoning ocean blues glinting in the bright light, I would inhale the heady mix of honeyed sunshine, salty air, and sea breeze.

The ten Augusts we vacationed on Martha’s Vineyard, the ten summers that mark the high tide of my sons’ childhoods, are ingrained deeply within me. Whether the Vineyard’s beauty reflects back the golden age of childhood or the retrospective glory of their boyhoods burnishes my Vineyard memories, it matters little.

I see us, spent and sandy, urging the kids—sunscreened, sunkissed, sunburnt—toward the car, traces of salty ocean trickling down their legs. “One last swim.”

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Then I Was</th>
<th>Now I Am</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Young and in love</td>
<td>Older and know what love is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buoyant, at the ocean, dark-eyed, young and alive, round-faced</td>
<td>Tired. Wiser and more afraid. Aware of the power of love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So narrow minded my ears rubbed together</td>
<td>More understanding of people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiting for answers</td>
<td>Trying to remember the questions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I see us, spent and sandy, urging the kids—sunscreened, sunkissed, sunburnt—toward the car, traces of salty ocean trickling down their legs. “One last swim.”

---

Lora Brody is a Waltham based photographer and a devoted Osher member. If you would like more information about The Reunion Project, please visit the website TheReunionProject.org, or email lora@lorabrody.com.
they had begged. Soon we showered, then rinsed our suits—for years in the Glass House, its transparent walls and open atrium inviting the outdoors in.

After an early dinner we might drift towards Menemsha, a fishing village ever on the verge of gentrification. On iffy beach days, we would opt for its shore with the easy parking—the pebbly sand mere steps away. In the evenings, the kids raced along Menemsha’s stretched out, boulder-rich jetty.

Until he turned six, Jeremy, who trailed his brother Chip and Jon Goodman by three years and Lilah, his fierce protector, by five, preferred to meander with me along Menemsha’s docks. There, an array of boats, anchored for the night, gently swayed. Jeremy favored “boats with living rooms.” We would linger by a cabin cruiser, admiring its tiny, tidy space and wondering if the dining table collapsed and the cushioned benches converted into beds.

But the featured attraction of Menemsha eves was the sunset. As the eagerly awaited moment approached, crowds gathered on the jetty—families like ours; cuddling couples huddled under a single sweatshirt; raucous college kids polishing off takeout fried clams from nearby Home Port. Most sunsets elicited oohs and aahs—spectacular ones a round of applause.

Although the rhythm of our days beat to the ocean’s tides, the luxury of leisure left hours to hike through sanctuaries—Cedar Tree Neck, Felix Neck, Menemsha Hills Reservation—or to bike through the state forest, dull with stunted trees, but safe for young bikers. On my favorite ride—often as a getaway with Carol Goodman—we would pump up and coast down the hills of Middle Road. Passing a horse farm just before the turn onto Music Street in West Tisbury, we waved to the horses’ faces poking out from the second story hayloft.

A creamsicle treat from Alley’s General Store energized us for the hills of South Road. The right turn at Beetlebung Corner signaled that we were nearly home—just one more right onto Middle Road. That last steep hill earned us a view of Keith Farm, its storybook pond anchored by a weathered barn with dazzling white trim. Towering over sturdy cornstalks, triumphant sunflowers faced us like a dozen August suns.

The final day of our Vineyard vacation, we always visited Lucy Vincent. On a beach day, the adults would linger in the seductive waves. Indulging the kids with two or three “last swims,” Don and I would air dry as we roamed the shore, tracking the ocean’s edge. Our feet left imprints in the damp sand and sank into watery holes—the beach reluctant to let us go.

On cool or drizzly days, we would stop by just to pay tribute.

Over thirty years have passed, more than a quarter of a century. My sons are long grown, married, with children of their own. Don and I have not ventured back to the scene of those idyllic summers. We have not dared. Where could we find our little boys, our gangly teens? Nowhere on the Vineyard beaches . . . everywhere in our yearning hearts.
SPOTLIGHT IS A PUBLICATION OF
THE OSHER LIFELONG LEARNING INSTITUTE
AT TUFTS UNIVERSITY

All materials contained in this publication (including text, photographs, and artworks) are protected by United States copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, published, or modified in any way without the prior written consent of the Osher LLI at Tufts or, in the case of third-party materials, the owner of that content.