

MIXED MUSINGS FROM AN ADDLED MIND

By Steven Cupo
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Table of Contents

Dedication	- 4 -
Making a clean sweep.....	- 5 -
Paradise Found.....	- 9 -
Oh! And one more thing	- 12 -
Ashes to Ashes	- 14 -
... and taxes	- 19 -
Music to my eyes	- 21 -
Being a sew and sew	- 25 -
The Collector	- 30 -
Tres Chic.....	- 34 -
Coats of many colors.....	- 38 -
19	- 43 -
The Stuff That Dreams are Made of.....	- 47 -
Animal Antics	- 51 -
Tick ... tick ... tick	- 54 -
Watch out!	- 56 -
No sweets for me	- 58 -
Subway stories	- 61 -
The Numbers Game	- 64 -
Matters of affection	- 66 -
Southwest Home Gardening.....	- 68 -
Running hot and cold	- 71 -
Mr. Fix It	- 73 -
Whinny!.....	- 77 -
Keepin' busy.....	- 79 -
Keychain Card/Cross	- 82 -
Lunar-tic behavior	- 83 -
Spirit filled	- 86 -
Retro eatin'	- 89 -
Happy Anniversary	- 92 -
Going through the changes.....	- 94 -
Fun facts.....	- 96 -
“I’m innocent!”	- 99 -
Follow-up to “I’m innocent!”	- 102 -

Singin' in the Rain.....	- 105 -
Making ends meet	- 107 -
Shocking!.....	- 111 -
Electrifying!.....	- 115 -
All washed up.....	- 120 -
When it rains	- 124 -
Lost in the woods.....	- 127 -
ooooooooo! ... aaaaaaaah!	- 131 -
Still in awe... ..	- 132 -
Waiting around	- 132 -
Yummy!	- 135 -
Happy Birthday to ME!.....	- 138 -
Birthday postscript.....	- 140 -
Weather or not	- 143 -
What's in a name?	- 146 -
It's only a number	- 149 -

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my family and friends, without whom I'd have NOTHING to write about.

Thanks for the stories!

Making a clean sweep

We need a cleaning person!!!

You would think, with all the extra time my darling Danny and I have had from spending the past year in isolation, we would have found a modicum of inspiration to clean the house. But, noooooooooo! The thought of spending a day vacuuming and dusting holds the same appeal as grinding a sharp stick in one's eye.

Yes, we have been busy with "stuff". Danny, in particular, for the better part of the year, was incredibly diligent in his U of AZ classes. Even though he is now "retired" from the work-a-day grind, he continues to be involved in church-related committees, as well as serving on a board for an organization that sponsors young volunteers who give up many months at a time to help the needy. As a result, he is almost as busy as when he was employed.

And, besides, he hates to clean. Before we were together, he would never clean his car. His friends would wait until he went out of town and decontaminate it for him.

So, what's my excuse? "I don't wanna!"

Look, it's not as if the house is falling down in decay and putrefaction. Over the weeks, I have occasionally picked up a broom, mop or dust rag and spot cleaned something that was too unbearable to continue to look at. And I assure you, the toilets and sinks do get my attention every week or two.

However, overall, it is beginning to get "unhealthy" around here.

You see, we live in a desert. The desert topsoil tends to be a fine grit sand that has the tendency to blow into any crack and crevice of the house. As a result, there is ... shall we say? ... an unwanted build up from the outside on the inside.

And DUST BUNNIES!!! They are taking over. Every once in a while, I will become aware of battalions of dust bunnies amassing in a corner or two. One would think they have been secretly plotting an invasion and, in one fell swoop, burst upon our poor floors like something from a D-Day scenario.

It can get ugly.

The funny thing ("hilarious") is if you walked into our little home right now (double masked, of course), you would probably remark on how neat and clean it is. Ohhhh, believe me, it is all "smoke and mirrors". Just because we keep it neat, with no clutter strewn around, the tidiness of it all belies the dirt lurking ... not, "just below the surface" ... ON the surface ... EVERYWHERE!

We are spoiled. Since Danny's and my early days together, we've had cleaning "ladies". When we were living in Washington, DC, we decided, due to both our nutty work schedules and limited "down" time, we would splurge on having someone come in

and “make a dent” in our debris. We figured, because we were both working so much, our combined salaries could afford the luxury of having a cleaning service. Yes, yes ... there was a modicum of Protestant guilt associated with the decision. “If you can’t do it on your own, it isn’t worth doing”. Well ... those pangs of regret lasted about two seconds the first time someone cleaned our toilets for us!

Although, I have to step back a bit when relating to you the excitement we felt from our first cleaning lady in Washington, D.C. Our original helper turned out not to be such a good example of the profession.

Friends of ours had recommended her, but they neglected to tell us of her shortcomings. I suppose they were just trying to give her more work, so they wouldn’t have to feel so badly when they FIRED her.

I should have known something was amiss on our first meeting. She told me she did not bring her own cleaning supplies and we would need to furnish them for her. The other caveat was the specificity of the supplies. She insisted on the most expensive products and brands. Being this was my first “rodeo”, I didn’t have the knowledge nor gumption to show her the door. Instead, I naively went along with her demands. Yes, we were happy to have the bathrooms cleaned, but we began to notice things were occasionally a bit “off”. The dials on the stove no longer had the numbers printed on them. We couldn’t figure out why we could no longer tell the oven temperature! She had been using the oven cleaner that was supposed to be applied ONLY to the interior of the oven. She was cleaning the entire stove with EasyOff Oven Cleaner! We suspected she couldn’t read the instructions. Those little numbers on the knobs just melted away. Then we began to notice certain things weren’t clean even after she had been there for part of the day. (“Why is that still dusty? HmMMM ...”).

Her downfall was when we found curlers and hairpins in the downstairs bathroom. Apparently, we had been paying her to “do” her hair!

We got rid of her.

(We replaced the knobs for the stove. I found them online. The small knobs were \$25 a piece. The knob for the oven was \$60!!! The appliance was a discontinued model. Sheesh!)

Our friends redeemed themselves because after we AND they both had fired she-who-shall-not-be-named, they sent us Silvyva.

“O Silvyva, Silvyva! Wherefore art thou Silvyva?”

Silvyva was from Guatemala. Her husband was in construction. When we hired her, they had a couple of children. However, over the years, she had two more and, at her insistence, worked right up to her delivery dates! When she first began to clean for us, I was stunned and amazed to see her on a ladder cleaning the unseen tops of our

cabinets and bookshelves! Each time she came, she spent hours lovingly “spitting and polishing” our home. PLUS the numbers stayed on the knobs of the stove!

She was (and still is) a darling person. We got to be such good friends. She taught me Spanish and I listened to her stories about her home country. Yes, Danny and I were her employers and she was our “help”. But she and I became so much more than that. I called her “Mommee”. She called me “Nino”. We became great pals. And she spoiled me. More often than not, she would bring me a pile of homemade tortillas for my week. Every now and then, she would also surprise me with her DELICIOUS tamales. Heaven! In return, Danny and I gave her gifts of monetary bonuses. But, I am grateful in the knowledge that those gifts weren’t the basis of our friendship. We genuinely had a true affection for each other.

Silvya was with us until we moved to Tucson in 2017. The funny thing about knowing her was, in the 15-odd years together, Danny never met her. He, naturally, was always working. She was special to me and we all regretted they never met.

After we got to Tucson, I never thought we would be able to find another person as sweet, caring and earnest as Silvya. However, the “gods of cleaning” smiled on us and sent us Norma.

I opened my mailbox one day, and there was Norma’s business card. I figured there would be no harm in interviewing her. There sure wasn’t!

Norma and I immediately hit it off. She was a native Tucsonian with a strong Mexican heritage. In her early fifties, with a couple of husbands behind her, she was a spitfire. Funny and “ballsy”, I swore I surely had worked with her in the theatre when I was younger. She was also one of those detailed oriented people who cleaned as if she was doing her own home. She easily spent four hours every time she came here. Like Silvya, she was full of surprises. She not only would dust the tops of the furniture, she dusted underneath the furniture as well. She regularly sprayed and dusted the rungs of all our dining room chairs and bar stools. In my entire life, I never did that! She even persistently scrubbed our filthy screened in back porch! C’mon! Who does that?

I was also grateful to her. When she first began working here, my dad was still living with us. With him, she was always kind and generous with her time. Norma made me laugh. She had this way of telling a story that turned the tale into a comedic monologue! I looked forward to seeing her every month.

Sadly for Norma, her years of cleaning took its toll on her body. Even before we hired her, she wore a back-brace. Eventually, all the physical activity became too much for her and she had to have back surgery. Unfortunately, as these things sometimes happen, the surgery actually made her pain even worse and she had to stop working

completely. Danny and I continued to pay her until she went on disability. It was the least we could do for everything she had done for us.

But ... that was a year ago.

COVID-19 crept into all our lives. Danny and I didn't feel comfortable bringing a new cleaning person into the house. So ... we were left to our own cleaning devises ... which, as I've stated, ain't that persistent.

But now, our indolence has acted as a great motivator. As the vaccines come and this plague surely will abate, it is time to, once again, rely "on the kindness of strangers". We've decided our surroundings need it and our health demands it.

I just hope, whomever we get, they like to dust the unseen tops of the cabinets and the rungs of our chairs. It would be nice for a tamale or two. But none of that is really important. What is significant is that they are sincere in doing the task at hand.

And the numbers stay on the knobs.

Cleanliness is next to Godliness,

Hazel

Paradise Found

What is it about Tucson?

I have often written of how the area is truly special; not only special, but unique. Some of all y'all who have been here know of what I speak of. But for those of you who aren't as informed as you could be, let me give you a little lay of the land (so to speak).

First, it must be told that Tucson and its 'burbs are surrounded by mountains. Northeast of the city are the Santa Catalina Mountains. That is the range that continues north and passes by my house. I see these peaks close up and personal when I walk out to get my mail. Also to the north and west are the Tortolita Mountains. To the south of Tucson are Santa Rita Mountains. The Rincon Mountains are to the east and the Tucson Mountains to the west. As I said ... surrounded!

All these peaks make for GREAT panoramic viewing. Even when my darling Danny and I are doing something as mundane as driving down the road to get to Walmart, we are treated with the most spectacular scenery. Since I moved here, I have always said that "our" Walmart's parking lot probably has the best view in the country!

As I am expounding on the beauty of Tucson, I have to include the fact we are situated in the middle of a desert. I know all you Nor'easters are thinking dunes, blowing sand and camels. No, it is not like a scene from "Lawrence of Arabia". This is the Sonoran Desert and it is GREEN. The desert goes all the way to the Pacific coast to Baja. Yes, there are cacti, mesquite trees and various types of shrubbery. However, the plants that live here stay green almost all year round. And many of them bloom in vibrant, almost artificial appearing, color the entire year as well. As a result, it is gawgeous! With the rolling hills surrounding the city that lead to the mountains, there are always lovely valleys to survey and admire.

And speaking of surveying and admiring, them thar hills are covered with hiking trails! There are trails everywhere; on city, state and federal land. There are several state parks and TWO Saguaro National Parks; one on either side of the city.

For those who need to know, a saguaro is that really tall cactus with their limbs raised up as though the newest gang in town is about to rob them. (When I first moved here, I was chastised for mispronouncing the name of the plant. I was emphatically told the "g" is silent. Well, excuuuuuuuse me!)

Tucson also has 131 miles of pristine bike trails all around and through the city. There is even a loop trail that was just completed taking you all the way around Tucson. We live 25 miles north of the Loop and there are connector trails leading to it. You can get anywhere in town on your bike. As a matter of ipso facto, this is a destination city for

national and international cycling competitors. As a plus, our annual bike marathon is supposed to have some of the best scenery in the world.

NOW, I can hear you non-believers crying out the old paeon: "But isn't it hot???" Okay, I have written about this before and this is probably the last time (not) I am going to educate you: "IT'S A DRY HEAT!" ... most of the year. Here's the truth of the matter: the truly hot time is from the end of June to mid-September. In that period, one goes out in the morning or in the evening when it is in the 70's or 80's to get stuff done. Otherwise, you stay indoors to protect yourself from the weather. But that is not unlike you folks farther north who stay inside to protect yourself during the winter months. Only our inside interval in the summer doesn't last as long as your inside interval in the winter! We are out and about in a far shorter time than you as you still shiver next to your cold furnaces. And indeed, even if it does stay hot in the evening here, that 102 degrees feels like a pleasant 85; again, it's the dry heat.

One last observation about the climate: we hardly EVER get snow. If it comes, it melts in a day. If there is any snow that lingers, it is on the tops of the mountains; just close enough to enjoy the beauty, but still far enough away so as not to have to deal with it! Unless you want to snow ski. There is a lovely ski resort at the top, which is barely an hour's drive away. And besides, Tucson sure as heck will never be hit with "Snowmageddon" or week-long temps below zero! Our winter temperature averages are 45 for a low and 70 for a high. And except for some occasional (and very dramatic) rain storms, it is sunny most ALL the time.

"But I want to see the seasons!". There you go again. Because the peaks in the Santa Catalina Mountains are so tall, a short drive up the mountain road in the Fall will place you directly in the midst of any kind of autumn color. Not to mention the unbelievable views you experience on your way up.

Oh! And for those of you in equestrian circles, I recently read that there are 180,000 horses in the Tucson area! Heigh ho, Silver!

Enough of Mother Nature!

Tucson is a very artsy town. There is a large variety of theatres and venues throughout the urban footprint. Bigger spaces bring in the National Tours of famous singers as well as the latest stage offerings. Smaller theatre companies produce high quality productions for 3/4 of the year. Tucson has its own ballet company and symphony. As a matter of fact, music is a crucial part of this city. Tucson is filled with small venues playing live music and serving food and drinks all year round. These days, in most other cities, those sort of settings are few and far between. Tucson even hosts a Jazz Festival and Cabaret Festival in the summer! I can hear musicians from New York

and L.A. on my own turf! Of course there is lots of blue grass and country music. And the mariachi orchestras are not to be missed!

Being that Mexico is only about 60 miles away, the culture and food is prevalent here.

Oh, the FOOD!!! As some of the local advertisements state, the best “23 miles of Mexican food” is in the Tucson cuisine and cultural corridor. Besides being able to get the best southwest cuisine this side of the Colorado, Tucson has been given a very special honor by the the cultural arm of the United Nations. UNESCO officially recognized Tucson as a Creative City of Gastronomy. Believe it or not, Tucson is one of the only two cities in the United States given that distinction. Many might take issue with that fact. However, even if you have other opinions about where to find the best food, it can not be denied that the cooking here is amazing! There are many farm-to-table restaurants. Fantastic breweries with homemade bar-b-que! And, due to the mafia settling here before Las Vegas was built, the only remaining vestiges of the Cosa Nostra are the fabulous Italian restaurants everywhere!

Granted some modifications were made to adjust for the COVID situation, however, the fact that the quality of our cuisine is still available by takeout and is outstanding.

Our only regret is there are no German restaurants. There are great microbreweries with brats and knockwurst made in-house. But, no place with a full German menu. Oh well. The multitude of other epicurean choices make up for the small gap.

So come to Tucson!

Come see our high end art and history museums. Come experience the largest gem show in the country. Come see the public art and statues that fill the city. Come have lunch in our outdoor cafes or dinner at our one-of-a-kind bistros. If the month long national book fair doesn't entice you, maybe the opulent All Souls/Day of The Dead parade with thousands of costumed participants will. Or if the Tucson Rodeo isn't your cup of tea, perhaps our opera company is.

Whatever your taste, the best of the best is here in Tucson.

Thus, of course ... so are Danny and I.

Almost a native,
El Cuperro

Oh! And one more thing.

After my extolling the assets of our beloved adopted city of Tucson, my darling Danny reminded me of one more special facet that is truly unique to our area. I am referring to the amazing fact that, at sunset, “our” mountains morph into a palette of vivid, saturated pink.

The Santa Catalina Mountains, north of the city, are primarily composed of a type of granite called Catalina Granite. Like most granites, quartz crystals make up part of the composition of the rock. Quartz, as I’m SURE you ALL know, is highly reactive to light.

WELL!

Due to the large amount of dust in the atmosphere in the desert, sunsets tend to be very colorful; especially in the red spectrum. Spectacular orange and pink skies are fairly well the norm around here when the sun goes down.

The western side of the Santa Catalina Mountains face almost directly west ... which is probably why it is referred to as “the western side” (cough!). At most times of the year, just as the sun is setting, dust particles, water vapor and ice crystals reflect the dusk’s colorful light. At the same time, the quartz crystals in the mountain face disperse those brilliant hues of the sunset. As a result, for a few minutes most evenings, the mountains turn bright pink. I am not talking a subtle coral here ... I am saying they turn “hot” pink! Nothing at all subtle about the color!

Every time the phenomenon happens, it is an amazing sight to see.

Of course, the occurrence creates a reaction in everyone who observes it. There is a saying around here:

“When the mountains are pink,
it’s time to drink”.

This results in a lot of sloshed, but still awestruck retirees at happy hour.

I have come up with some original “catchy” lines of my own to express my feelings with regard to our light display.

“The pink you just saw,
makes you feel awe”.

Or ...

“The view of God’s work,
is just one more perk”.

(Hey! I write stories, not poetry!)

Anyway, whatever your response to this extraordinary feat of nature, be it emotional or through alcohol, the intoxication you feel is undeniable. The uncommon beauty of the experience reminds you how special this area truly is.

Waiting for the next sunset,
Boozy Suzie

Ashes to Ashes

Not to be morbid, but ...

“Now I think we ought to talk about death. Most people do, you know”.

That’s a line from a musical that failed on Broadway in the 1960s called “70, Girls, 70”. The music was composed by Kander and Ebb; the same guys who wrote the scores for “Cabaret” and “Chicago”. The premise is that a bunch of seniors living in a retirement hotel in New York City embark on a spree of stealing furs with the intent of using the resale money to buy their residence before it is sold to developers. After the last heist, just as the police are closing in, the lead character (Ida) dies of a heart attack.

No wonder it bombed.

Anyway, toward the end of the show, Ida gives a monologue about death, taking advantage of opportunities you are given and where do you go after you die; specifically, “where does an elephant go?” (What?) Of course, being a musical, at the very finish, Ida comes back on stage, floating on a cutout moon and the closing song is sung.

Bad book; good music.

In the past, I know I have given tributes to friends I’ve known who have passed. However, due to the tragedy of the COVID-19 virus and with the specter of the grim reaper hovering around us these days, I got to thinking more of my own experience with the death of family and friends. In particular, my encounters with the ritual we call “the funeral”. So I felt I should “talk” about it.

Look, I know this isn’t the most fun subject I have written about, especially in the light of so many passing. However, attending funerals is a part of my history. The memories and residual feelings are strong in my mind and heart.

Not that I remember every funeral I’ve ever attended. Living through the AIDS crisis in the 1980’s and 1990’s, there were so many services, they simply blur together. However, some internments stand out and, to this day, still have an effect on me.

I attended the first funeral, in 1968 when I was fourteen years old. Before that, both my parents did attend wakes and funerals. But, up until that point, no matter what age I was, I was never asked along. I suppose they thought it would be too much for me. I just thought it was something that grown-ups did and where young’uns weren’t allowed.

My poor father’s father died in 1959, when I was five. There was no way my parents would subject their hyper-active toddler to that experience. In the ensuing years, I never questioned not going along.

That is, until I was fourteen.

So imagine the shock I got from the fact that my inaugural experience was at my own paternal grandmother's funeral.

(We grandkids called her "Mom"; her clan knew her as Mae, although her real name was Mary.)

First, there was the two days of "the viewing" at the funeral parlor. I remember sitting for what seemed like hours as strangers passed by giving their condolences to our family. I also recall my older brother, John, being so overcome with grief, my father's brother's wife, Betty giving him half a Valium. (It was the 1960's ... "prescriptions can't hurt you.") Boy was he out of it for the rest of that day! To me, I felt removed from the whole affair. My grandmother didn't look real. She more resembled a mannequin than my "Mom". I suppose my feelings of being disassociated from the whole situation was due to disorientation and being emotionally numb.

The shocker that pulled me back to reality happened on the second day when it came time for the funeral staff to close the lid of her coffin. My sweet great aunts began screaming and wailing.

Look, I come from a white bread Protestant background. No adult EVER screamed like that unless they were really angry at a referee's bad call during a football game. These darling women, full of love and warmth, suddenly turned into banshees!

"Pray for us, Mae"!!! "God be with you, Mae"!!! I mean SCREAMING! Up until that moment, I never thought that sound would come from the throats of my Italian aunties!! It gave me the creeps!

I still hate the sound of yelling ... even my own!

Later on in my life, I learned about "keening" (wailing in grief for a dead person). Apparently, following the old Italian tradition, the wailing was something you simply did. In my young mind, traditions such as these should have been readily avoided.

Next, we all drove into downtown Schenectady to the Catholic cathedral my grandmother attended.

As a side bar, I think I've told you in the past that even though I was raised Protestant, both grandmothers were baptized in the Catholic Church. (See the bio of my mother.)

Anyway, after a long, slow slog downtown, we arrived at the cathedral. It was huge. When I was younger, I had occasionally attended Mass with my dear "Mom" at that very church. Since the services had been in Latin, they were just weird and boring to me. I never could see the size of the interior due to the incense smoke. However, walking into the church on that day, I became aware of what a huge, empty expanse it was.

Being that it was in late autumn, it was a cold, overcast day. The sun was nowhere to be seen. That is how the whole affair felt: cold and overcast. We were seated first, before my grandmother's casket was rolled in. Due to the fact that the alter was up some steps and on a raised platform, the coffin remained in the center aisle. The priest droned on for HOURS. I was simultaneously stunned and bored.

Then ... just as the service seemed to be mercifully coming to an end, the priest said (in English) something like: "Into Your hands we commend the spirit of our sister, Mary Agnes". At that moment, a brilliant ray of sunshine beamed through a single window and shone exclusively on my grandmother's casket. I was again stunned, but now for a completely different reason. I felt the Divine was present. Although the sight of the sunbeam warmed and settled me, that was still a lot for a kid to take in.

When the service was over, the sunshine disappeared. It briefly appeared only once more, when we were standing in the cemetery at the grave. For me, that was just a final reminder that my grandmother was now in a good place.

My long suffering mother's father (who we called "Pa") had TWO funerals. He died two days before Christmas in 1972. His first funeral was Christmas Eve. I remember my grandmother ("Grammie") fainting dead away (excuse the phrase) in front of his casket. Thank goodness my hearty Aunt Shirley was there to catch her. Otherwise, I don't recall much of the service.

Unfortunately, because the winter ground in upstate New York was frozen solid, we had to wait until the spring thaw in order to bury him. As a result, my poor "Grammie" had to go through the ordeal of another funeral only a few months later. In the meantime, "Pa's" body was stored in a little brick building on the edge of the cemetery. There was always something about that concept that creeped me out. But, I suppose ya gotta do what ya gotta do!

My darling "Grammie" outlived "Pa" by 12 years; passing on in 1984. I remember her funeral as the most difficult thing I ever experienced in my life.

My "Grammie" and I were soul mates. I couldn't imagine life without her.

The funeral home where she was laid out was on the other side of Schenectady. It was a good 20/25 minute drive from our house. When we arrived, most of my family went into the funeral parlor first. I lagged behind, dreading the inevitable sight of seeing my beloved "Grammie" in her coffin. My mother's sister, Lee, stayed behind with me, encouraging me to enter in. When I gathered some sort of courage to go through the door, the first thing I saw was my grandmother "in repose" at the end of the center aisle. I couldn't do it. I couldn't walk in. I just turned to my sweet Aunt Lee and mumbled something like, "I can't. I'm walking home." And I turned and fled in some vague direction toward my parents' house. I walked and walked. It was cold. I wept so hard, I

couldn't even see the sidewalk. However, I kept moving in a general, but haphazard direction, toward the house. After what seemed like an eternity, but was probably only 15 minutes, a voice in my head said, "Go back". Still weeping, I stopped short. Not sure where I was or what I should do, I felt myself turn around as if invisible hands were gently guiding me. Somehow, I soon found myself outside the funeral parlor. My older brother John was standing by the front door, telling me our mother was looking for me.

I only have two more flashes of memory from that day. The first was my Aunt Lee's face. She looked so relieved. She said she was really glad I came back. The other was standing next to the coffin crying uncontrollably. I couldn't even raise my eyes to look at anything. The rest is a blank.

I am still left with a hole in my heart where my "Grammie" lived. But there is no gap in my soul, because I know she is still with me. However, after all these years, I still cry when I think of her.

There have been many other funerals I have attended over the decades. For many of them, I was asked to sing in the ceremony. Some of those instances were easier than others. Three stand out in my mind.

The first was in the late 1990's, when I was asked to participate in my beloved pastor's funeral at our church in Washington, DC. Reverend Larry had died after a long illness. There was to be a huge celebration of his life. The folks arranging the service wanted me to sing a solo. Thank goodness, by that time in my life, I had so much stage experience. I needed to draw on that background in order to focus enough to get through the song without breaking down. In a way, concentrating on what I needed to do also helped me get through the service. When it was my turn, I stood up, sang my tribute, hitting all the notes and nuances I needed, then sat down and bawled like a baby. All that intense emotion I had been holding back came out as though a dam had burst. I knew it was alright to let go ... it was a funeral after all. I was just a little self-conscious because I was sitting on the altar in front of hundreds of people. Snotty noses are not pretty.

The second instance that comes to mind was singing at one of my very bestest friend's, Leon Hampton's funeral in the mid-2000s. Leon died in his sixties of liver cancer. He knew he was going to pass for quite a long time beforehand. As a result, he actually semi-planned his funeral. One of his requests, which he had told me about even BEFORE he got sick, was for me to sing the Schubert "Ave Maria"; all three verses ... in German!

Leon had received his degree in Law. However, he also maintained a second major in German, thus his request.

My life experience, once again, came to my aid. Even though I grew up with a German family and took a year of German in college, I could barely remember a word of basic German. But, come time to face the music, I squeaked by with real or imagined pronunciations. Boy, I will tell you, in that instance, concentrating on that undertaking (so to speak) sure took my mind off my grief!

My last memory of singing at a funeral is of my very own mother's ceremony. My mother, Ruth, died on Memorial Day in 2008 only one month after her 80th birthday. She had been adamant about not having a full-blown funeral, but just a simple gravesite service. She had also asked me to sing at her burial; this meant I needed to sing at her open grave. She even gave me the music of the hymn she wanted me to perform: "Beautiful Isle of Somewhere". Although it was a simple song, I had never before heard of it. That meant I needed to memorize a song I didn't know, sing it without accompaniment, while all the time grieving the death of my own mother.

No pressure.

My darling Danny came to the rescue. Danny is a self-taught accordion player. He offered to accompany me on his accordion. Hooray! I wasn't going to be doing the deed alone. Having him there gave me the courage and the security to follow through with what I was being asked to do. Of course I cried when I was finished, but Danny's support made it all bearable.

One more memory of my mother's rites. She was living in New Jersey near my younger brother Michael and his wife Alicia. After my mother passed, her body still needed to be moved to Schenectady for burial. So, Mike and Alicia arranged for "the viewing" in New Jersey (family only) before the funeral folks drove her hearse the three-ish hours to the cemetery in Schenectady. Her casket was open when I arrived for her wake. I was surprised and delighted to see it filled with crossword puzzle books, pencils, family pictures, cat figurines (which she LOVED) and a couple of her favorite murder mystery novels. Alicia said they thought "Ma" would enjoy them "for the road".

I loved that.

Let's all hope when our time comes, we will be packed and ready "for the road". However, even if we may not be completely ready, here's hoping our loved ones will give us a nice send off, a happy remembrance and a loving nudge toward our next journey.

And, for me, maybe they will include a crossword puzzle or two.

Resting in love,
Your soulmate

... and taxes.

There is that old saying, “... in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes”.

Well, since I just wrote about death, I think it would be appropriate to segue directly into the subject of taxes.

(I can hear the sound of snoring already!)

Bear with me here. Like it or not, taxes are completely part of our existence. We’ve all had to deal with them for YEARS, whether it be income tax or sales tax.

Except, of course, if you happen to live in a state that does NOT charge sales tax (in alphabetical order: Alaska, Delaware, Montana, New Hampshire, Oregon). If you are IN one of those territories, then you get to run rampant through the aisles, online or otherwise, smugly waving your credit card, knowing the number you see on the price tag is the same number you will be charged at the check out.

BUT when it comes to paying income taxes, ya STILL have to belly up to the bar like the rest of us peons. That is, unless you happen to be in a certain echelon, political or societal, that allows you to wriggle your way around the current tax laws, leaving we peasants to make up for your skulduggery.

Although, over the years, I have known a couple of my peers who were remiss in their duty of filing their income taxes at the end of the year.

One fella didn’t do his due diligence out of his feeling it wasn’t something in which he wanted to participate. (Oh heck! Don’t you just wish the rest of us had that luxury?) I’m sure he tried not to get caught. He had several different addresses over the years. Maybe he was hoping the agents wouldn’t find him. They found him.

A woman I knew didn’t pay her income taxes because she was the queen of procrastination. She procrastinated so long that one year piled onto another year. Before she knew it, she had “piles” of years of unfiled income taxes. She happened to be a hoarder, so it kind-a made sense. Unfortunately, the I.R.S. discovered her “problem”. By the time I moved out of Washington, DC, I believe she was still paying off her back taxes.

A few years ago my darling Danny was audited. (AUGH!). It wasn’t because he was doing anything illicit. On the other hand, it was because he was doing a really generous thing. Danny has a wonderful philosophy of community outreach and support. Giving back to those in need is his lifelong watch cry. He is very generous with the amount of money he contributes to charities. (I’ve always said I am going to get into Heaven on the shirt tails of my darling Danny).

Well, apparently the government became suspicious of this sort of activity. It seems they didn't believe he gave away so much of the salary he earned. THANKFULLY we were able to track down proof of all his donations for that year. If the I.R.S. HAD asked for another year, we would have been screwed. That was because the paper trail for other years was not as complete as it was for that one particular period. After all was said and done and the torture of continued correspondences back and forth between Danny and the powers-that-be, it turned out the government OWED money to Danny! It wasn't much, however the retribution was worth ten times the financial reward.

I know you are asking, "Why wasn't Steven audited as well"? That's an easy answer. We weren't blankety-blank allowed to get married as of yet because the blankety-blank marriage laws had not yet been amended. As a result, we filed our income taxes separately for YEARS. The first year we filed as a couple, we also did a "beta" run to compare and see what the difference would be if we continued to file separately. It turned out, we were getting almost \$10,000 more on our refund as a couple than if we had filed as individuals. Talk about bias.

Anyway, in 2017, when we moved to Tucson, we were overwhelmed with questions of what we could or could not deduct from our move. Mr. Trump's administration had changed so many of the tax eligibility laws, we were completely in the fog. So, for the first time in our time together, we hired a real-live CPA to do our income taxes. Be-LIEVE me, it was the best decision we ever made in our LIVES! This guy really knew what he was doing. PLUS, other than compiling our receipts and 1099's, we didn't need to do squat! It was a matter of meeting with him once to turn over our paperwork and then a few weeks later to sign our returns. And, POOF, our refund money appeared in our checking account ... no fuss, no muss. Yes, yes, we needed to pay him his accountant fee, BUT those fees are deductible the following tax year, so no skin off our noses.

So, as of this writing, we have received our federal refund money and, most likely, in a few days will get our Arizona state money as well.

All the more for charity!

Yes, it still is a pain in the patootie to have to compile one's taxes. But, look at it this way: the alternative is the other side of that old "death and taxes" adage. At this point in my life, I'd rather pay the government than pay the piper.

Feeling alive,
A dutiful citizen

Music to my eyes

Dang! Dontcha just love this here new fangled mo-dern technology? Good golly... them whiz bang corn-trapshuns 'r' jus' the cat's pajamas!!

Gee golly willikers!

Anywho, it seems to me, as we are still confined in our little haciendas, waiting for the vaccine to wander into our areas, everyone seems to be relying a whole bunches on the internet these days; even us "oldies but goodies". Almost all of us are getting our information or interacting with friends and/or family using the "Web". And that includes utilizing our compooters to meet our spiritual needs.

Since "the big shutdown" last March, my Danny and I have been attending church on Zoom.

Yes, I know so many of you agnostics consider this sort of activity a huge waste of time. But, guess what ... if one DOES believe in a higher power (as Danny and I do) and are nurtured and refreshed by a church service every week (as we are), then these Zooms are the next best thing to being there.

Our church is Mountain Shadows Presbyterian Church. It probably got its name because the church building stands in the "shadows" of the Santa Catalina "Mountains". (Mountain Shadows, naturally). And because it is a Presbyterian church, that is most likely why it is called ... wait for it ... "Presbyterian Church".

Anyway ...

Most everybody knows, a church's service mostly comprises not only of an earnest sermon and some heartfelt prayers and scripture readings, there usually is a BUNCH of music that goes hand-in-hand with the spoken word. Of course, that music involves a few nice hymns and a lovely anthem.

Since we have been on Zoom, the "nice hymns" part has been covered by our minister of music (the delightful Charmaine) playing piano in her living room, while the congregation sings aloud in the privacy of their own homes albeit with their screens on mute.

Well ... they are ENCOURAGED to sing. However, because our congregants are in their inner sanctums, I suspect not everyone manages to raise their vocal chords in happy unison. More likely most people are sitting on their comfy chairs silently, listening to the strains coming from the piano, waiting for the moment to pass. And that's okay. As long as they are participating in spirit and singing in their hearts. In reality, with the way some folks sound when they vocalize, it's probably best they don't sing along. They'd probably just scare the cat anyway.

It is when we get to the anthem portion of our church service where it gets tricky.

As many of y'all have already discovered, not everyone's compooters receive the same band width. (some electronics lingo there). As a result, everybody's signals don't coincide. That's okay if you are in a conversation. However, when a group of folks try to sing together "live" as a choir, the sound doesn't sync up. The result is not pretty. So what do the clever people at our church do? We pre-record ourselves and it is played back at the appropriate time in the service.

But, "not so fast", you say! "Isn't singing together in these times of the PLAGUE one of the most dangerous things one can do?"

Well, I didn't SAY we pre-recorded ourselves in the same room. That would be suicide! We each record our individual tracks in the privacy of our bedrooms or patios or showers, wherever we feel the sound is best.

First, Charmaine (our minister of music) lays down a piano track. Then she sends it off to we choir members via the internet.

To me this is interesting because the sound attachment we get in our emails first appears in a visual form! A whole track of tiny horizontal lines appear on my screen. If I place my cursor anywhere on that series of lines, I can find myself in the middle of the recorded piano part. I literally "see" the music before I hear it. (... hence the title of this piece).

Anyway, we each require two devices to do the needed deed of recording ourselves: one device to play the piano track while we listen with ear buds and another to actually record our voices. I use my cell phone for the ear bud side and my iPad to record.

Come to think of it, if I make a little "oopsy" whilst recording, I have the luxury of starting all over again and re-recording my vocal part. I LOVE that. It only gets annoying when I get obsessive/compulsive about doing the whole process and end up re-recording my part forty-eight times.

In addition, in order to "fill in" the sound of a piece, there have been times where I have been asked to record both the tenor and the bass parts in the same song. I like that it tests my versatility.

"But wait! How do you get the printed sheet music?", you ask?

Well, that is just more modern technological stuff at work. Charmaine (remember her?) scans the copy of the music she has licensed to use only within the auspices of the church and sends it along as an attachment in the same email she sent with the recorded piano track.

(Are you keeping TRACK of this? "TRACK"! Get it?!?!?!?)

So! After we "lay down our vocal" (professional lingo, thank you), we send it off.

"But to WHERE???"

To Dorothy, of course.

And who is Dorothy? Why, she is our sound production goddess. She also plays clarinet with most of our arrangements. In addition, she is an elder in our church ... which means she's a fairly BUSY personality. And, I might add, a darn nice person as well.

Anyway, La Dorothy, being the clever individual that she is, found an APP called Garage Band. It allows her to record, download and "mix" music. It's an online record producing sound board. After downloading the thing onto HER compoooter, she figgered out the ins and outs of how to make it work for our needs.

So, as a result, we ALL send our individual tracks to Dorothy and she makes music magic. She lines up all our voices and the instrumental tracks (if any) and, through the miracle of modern technology, makes it sound as if we are all in the same room.

Dorothy then emails the finished product off to Charmaine and the Pastor ... and an anthem is born.

At first the process was tentative. Some of the early stuff was a bit rocky. But as we've gotten better at recording ourselves and she's gotten better at mixing the tracks, it's actually sounding pretty good these days.

And we haven't limited ourselves to voices ... nooooooo! There is a small orchestra that occasionally plays either with the choir or as a separate ensemble. Very neat!

However, it was my darling Danny's idea to suggest we try the recording process with the "bell choir".

You see, our church owns hand bells. Before the epidemic, we would haul them out at holidays and attempt to make some semblance of a pretty sound with them. However, not everyone participating was completely proficient. As a result, when we played, the finished product was always a little ... shall we say ... rough. But NOW, if we make a little boo-boo-linsky, just as we do with the choir tracks, we simply re-record our parts and send off a practically perfect product. Also, we can play more complicated pieces because we can record as many bell parts as we have time to play! We never sounded better.

It's a miracle!

This process does have one drawback. With all that we have accomplished, I just hope the congregation doesn't expect such "perfection" when it is safe to get back together in person. When we start singing or playing "live" again, I am concerned the listeners will be sitting in their pews thinking "What happened?"

Maybe we should simply continue to record our tracks at home and lip sync them to a playback at church. It will almost seem as though we still know what we are doing.

Singing in the bathtub,
A devoted music maker

ps - If you are interested in listening to some of our recordings, our church's webpage is mountainshadowchurch.org. When you get there, click on Music.

Being a sew and sew

Yes, I sew.

So many illustrious luminaries before me began a fabulous career by sewing.

Not me. I just sew. However, I will immodestly say, I think I am pretty good at it. I enjoy how the art of sewing will spark my creativity by enabling me to figure out how something goes together and then making it sew ... er ... so. (Couldn't help myself. Hey! Did you know the male version of a seamstress is called a seamster? It's true. Think of "teamster", only more stylish.)

I got my start very early on in my tot-hood. My long suffering mother taught me how to hand sew and knit. You see, I had a nasty run-in with penicillin when I was about 5 years old. As a result, I was bedridden for weeks. When I began to feel better, but was still under doctor's orders to stay prone, out of complete boredom, I had a tendency to whine. I couldn't pass the time watching television. In those days, there was only one television set and it was in the living room. I was specifically charged to stay in bed ... in the BEDROOM. So in order to keep my idle hands busy and to stop me from whimpering all day long, my mother first taught me to knit squares of about 8 by 8 inches. She followed that by instructing me how to hand sew those squares together with the intention of creating an afghan.

It would be a nice story if I told you I made an entire afghan when I was five years old. However, before I created enough squares, I got to feeling better and the doctor released me from my bondage. So the whole project ended up in the back of a closet somewhere. BUT, the end result was that I began my first steps into seamster-dom.

My mother sewed quite well. What I mean is she knew how to use a sewing machine proficiently enough to make many of her own clothes. For years, I distrusted the contraption. It had too many moving parts to be in my comfort zone. Nor did I care to take the time to learn how to use it. I was happy doing things the old fashioned way; hands-on, as it were. My preference certainly served me well enough when making clothes for my troll doll. (See previous chapter about my love for Barbie.)

That all changed by the time I was a junior in high school. I was a regular "drama-rama"; that's a quaint derogatory word describing someone seriously involved in stagecraft: moi.

The big musical that year was "Oliver!". My theatre teacher and mentor, Mr. Sheehan, decided I should expand my horizons from performing to working backstage. He made me co-assistant director (with my pal Jo-Anne). In addition, I was to be the costume coordinator for the production and Jo-Anne would work on the sets and lights.

I was thrilled and horrified at the thought of coming up with costumes for a cast of about 40 kids; not to mention the cadre of under aged urchins Mr. Sheehan procured from the neighboring middle school.

Thank GOODNESS my girlfriend at the time (no snarky remarks, please), Marion was a whiz on the sewing machine. We got special permission to trudge over to the Home Economics classroom every day after school in order to make theatrical magic. We worked our buns off. Marion worked extra hard because she FIRST had to teach me how to use a sewing machine. I'm not sure if it was out of desperation or pure luck, but I, mercifully, got the hang of the thing fairly quickly.

Thank goodness, we didn't need to make every costume for the show. We rented some outfits for the lead roles. For the rest of the cast, we co-ordinated what everyone wore. That meant sending most every cast member home with a list of what they were required to wear and asking their poor mothers to take on that mantle of creating their offspring's costume. At that time in the late Sixties, gender roles for women still mostly hovered somewhere between Donna Reed and June Cleaver. To our good fortune, almost every mother knew how to sew.

Anyway, Marion and I still needed to make SOME costumes. While Marion created some wonderful outfits, I self-assigned myself to the uniforms for the show's boys in the orphanage; twelve of them. It struck me if I made the uniforms all the same size, the clothing would have the "rag-tag" look neglected ragamuffins would need. Plus, since I was just learning how to manipulate a sewing machine, my faux pas would just add to the "realism" needed for their look. This is when I got my first real taste of creativity. Eventually, I actually got pretty good at making frocked, tail coats for the "men" out of bathrobes. I was proud of that.

Anyhow, thanks to Marion's patience and prowess, I entered into the world of stitchery and never looked back.

Because of that experience, I was incredibly lucky when, two years later, I entered college with an intention to graduate with a B.A. in Dramatic Arts.

I was a poor-as-churchmouse student. Financially, I was barely squeaking by ("squeaking", "church mouse" ... get it?). I had procured a bank loan and was the recipient of a small scholarship, but it was just barely enough to get me through a semester. However, after taking a class in costume design, the powers that be noticed I had a real knack for looking at a drawing of a costume and creating a reasonable facsimile in fabric. My design class had taught me how to make patterns and to "drape" clothing on mannequins. Between the recognition of the professors and the hours I was required to put in at the costume shop for a grade in my class, I got my foot in the door for a work-study position. As a result, by my sophomore year, I was working 32 hours a

week in the costume shop at a really good hourly salary. The best part was it didn't matter WHEN I worked, as long as I put in my 32 hours by the end of each week. Yes, there were times I was there at midnight, after classes and rehearsing all day. But I had a LOT of energy back then. (One has a WHOLE lot more stamina when one is 20 years old than one has at 66!)

Anyway, that was a true learning experience! As a matter of fact, at that time, there was a "fork in the road" as to what I would do with the rest of my life. I needed to choose whether I would continue in my studies in performance or veer into costume design. I decided I was WAY too hyperactive to sit in a shop without daylight for 12 to 15 hours a day to make costuming my profession. My energy was better suited for the stage. If I had stayed with costuming, I probably would have gone crazy. I certainly would have ended up driving anyone working with me completely nuts.

I accepted that reality.

As the years moved on and I settled into the "adult" portion of my life, I did a LOT more designing and sewing for myself and my darling Danny.

I began my "at home" sewing internship by using an OLD portable machine I received as a donation from my sister-in-law's mother's church because nobody else wanted it. To show you how old the machine was, I can tell you it was carried in a wooden container! I used it for a few years before the motor gave up the ghost. Then, after my sweet Great Aunt Louise passed away, I received her portable Singer Sewing Machine because ... nobody else wanted it. I would say the gadget was approximately circa 1940 and was made of a very heavy cast iron. For a portable machine, it wasn't very portable! But the thing could practically sew through steel. However, in spite of the best care I could give it, that motor eventually burned out as well. Not very soon afterward, Danny and I went to a open air flea market with some friends in the Georgetown section of Washington, DC. There, Danny saw an aged sewing machine cabinet that, probably ... nobody else wanted. (I'm seeing a pattern here). Upon closer inspection, the sewing machine was still in it, along with all the thread, doodads and gizmos of the former owner. Obviously, a well loved machine. After the dealer said the machine still worked, we bought the whole cabinet, machine and doodads and carried it home in our car. Like my Aunt Louise's machine, this contraption also had the sewing strength of a titan. However, because of its age, the electric wire, which was brittle to begin with, shorted out. The Fates smiled upon me when I realized my Aunt Louise's electric cord might fit into the connecting prongs. Lo and behold, that cord fit and I was once again in business. Still, after some good use, that electric cord shorted out as well. But Danny was miraculously able to find an exact replacement cord online for only a few dollars, thus I was able to keep my sewing going. (I'm a poet ...!)

One thing about all of these old machines was that they could only sew in a straight line. Despite their durability, they didn't have the capacity for anything involving zig-zagging or other snappy features. Then one August, around the time of my birthday in 2014, Danny, my Dad and I were wandering around Walmart. (My poor father LOVES to wander around Walmart.) Because my birthday was coming up, they spontaneously offered to buy me a new sewing machine as a present. I was at a loss for words. It would be the first time in my life I would own a machine with all kinds of modern features! It even made button holes! Wowie! Wholeheartedly enticed by the glamorous options on the machine, I gladly accepted their offer.

In our house in DC, I made all the curtains; mostly out of old sheets or denim. (Frugality is my middle name ...) My creative juices were rolling. Also, even though Danny worked for the government, he didn't like to wear a jacket and tie. So I made a whole series of reversible vests for him to wear instead of a suit jacket. Over the years, he wore them with a variety of stylish bolo ties to complete his custom ensemble. I must have done okay because no one at the USDA complained.

In addition, I worked on commission for friends who knew what I was capable of.

However, if anyone DID hire me, I only had one caveat: there was to be absolutely no deadline ... EVER! They got the finished product when they got it. I knew myself pretty well. I belong to the procrastination club. Any deed that can be put off to tomorrow, gets put off another month ... or two. With that in mind, I was able to make some lovely curtains, pillow shams and bedspreads for several friends. One guy waited patiently for a YEAR for a queen sized coverlet for his bed, but was a gracious recipient upon its completion. I thought it looked lovely.

The only time I can remember agreeing to a specific finish date was when my pastor here in Tucson asked me to make a skirt out of two pieces of fabric from Japan her husband and sister had given her on separate occasions. Unfortunately, both fabrics had unrelated patterning in the cloth. One even had a large cartoon line drawing of a cat. The conundrum was how to make them all "fit" together. She wanted it for a celebration marking our church's anniversary and the commemoration of her time as a pastor. I took on the challenge. I had a great time drawing out several ideas to show her, making a mock up in muslin for her to try on and delivering the final product a few days before the event. All parties were pleased with the finished product.

Yes, it was fun and fulfilling, but the pressure of needing to have it ready on a certain day made me a little antsy. As much as I enjoyed the process, it proved to me I could NEVER do that as a living. In spite of the ingenuity involved, working on a time line would make my head explode.

Speaking of church, our parish here in Tucson sponsors an organization that

makes clothes for children in Africa. When the contact at our church stood up in service last year and asked for volunteers who knew how to sew, she was genuinely shocked when I came up to her later and offered my services. I suppose it was because I am a manly man. (Hey! There is a long tradition of male tailors in this world. I am just part of that heritage.) Before we locked down on account of the plague, I must have made almost 100 little dresses and shorts. I am very proud of that contribution.

Along those lines, another church member I know wanted to give up the serger she owned. A “serger” is a professional style machine that will “finish” the rough edges of a garment with interlocking thread while you sew a seam. That way, the fabric will be less likely to unravel. Apparently nobody wanted her serger (!) so I was VERY excited to take it off her hands. I was probably happier than a “normal” person would be over such a thing. But that meant, now, when I made those little dresses and pants, I could “finish” the edges so that the clothing would last longer for these kids who, otherwise, could never afford to replace them.

I am STILL sewing. Last year, the local community theatre asked me to make a “break away” straight jacket for a comedy they were putting on. That was an interesting commission. More recently, my next door neighbors had me re-cover their living room chairs in a wild jungle print (rowr!) Currently, I am replacing the canvas on our patio furniture after my little skinny butt (as Danny calls it) ripped a hole in one of the seats. I choose to think the Arizona sun rotted away the fabric as opposed to the potency of the bones in my rear end.

All-in-all, I am grateful for this sewing ability. I enjoy the creativity and the “close” hand work required. And I get a sense of pride from seeing the finished product.

My sewing skills has also given me a snappy comeback if folks feel I should join them in playing golf or attempting a few rounds of tennis. Being that I have always been terrible at sports and am the least bit interested, I simply tell them I will take them up on their offer if they first come spend a few days with me in my sewing room. For some reason, they never follow through.

Putting my idle hands to good use,
Coco Chanel

The Collector

I've never been one to avidly collect sets of ... well ... ANYTHING. I'm not sure why. I suppose because we didn't have a lot of money when I was growing up, the notion of having a bunch of "stuff" never appealed to me. Perhaps if I was used to having a batch of mink coats as a young'un, I would continue to want to have an even larger array as I grew older. However, without the history of having a lot of extra money to buy stuff ... meh ... I can do without.

On the other hand, my darling Danny has accumulated a couple of wonderful collections that I truly admire. It's not like he had a lot of money growing up either, but his life experiences were different than mine. As a result, I believe he views collecting from a different perspective than my own.

When (and if) you enter our home, the first grouping you will notice is a type of glass. It is called cranberry, opalescent hobnail glass. It looks like something you would see in the background of a Daguerreotype photo from the Civil War. (As a matter of fact, I just re-watched "Gone With the Wind" and I saw this particular glass in the set dressing of a couple of scenes.) The base color of the glass is a reddish to pinkish cranberry hue. Poking out from the cranberry potion are little bumps, called hobnail. All the hobnail bumps are white or opalescent. Thus, the name!

And I wasn't exaggerating when I said it would be the first thing you would notice when you came into our home. Even before Danny and I moved to Tucson, we mailed a hanging lamp made of that glass to our contractor. It was "up and running" in our entryway when we arrived!

Anyway, apparently many of the women-folk that came before Danny, including his mother, collected this particular type of glass. In the olden times, back in the 1970's, before The Internet, when Danny went off to college, he decided to assist his mother in procuring extra pieces. This was on account of his actually being away from his tiny farm town of Loogootee, IL and living in the big city of Champaign-Urbana. While at college, he had a greater "reach" finding the glass of his mother's desire. However, after a while, he caught the "bug" and began collecting it for his own. He eventually built up a collection to rival his mother's.

When Danny and I were living in Washington, DC, Danny's mom decided to downsize. She offered to sell her entire glass collection to Danny. Wanting to help her out, he bought the whole collection, practically doubling what we had in the house. We knew it would be folly to try to display it all, so, for many years, much of the glass lived in boxes under our cellar stairs.

I, one day, did inadvertently trim down the number of pieces in the accumulated

specimens. After hanging a rather large, heavy picture made of wood (see more below), the picture overwhelmed the wall hook, fell and obliterated a set of about 15 small, delicate glass baskets that had been sitting directly underneath the picture. They were all smashed into little teeny, tiny bits.

That's a sure way to reduce the size of a collection.

It is fortunate, however, that neither of us ever made a big deal if the glass was chipped, cracked or decimated. As a matter of fact, one time when Danny's parents were driving to visit us, his mother was bringing a very old, very rare piece. When Danny's dad got up to get into the back of their van to take a nap while his mom drove, he accidentally stepped on the bowl and broke it. When they showed it to us, we just glued it together and put into it a bunch of other shards that we had kept from past "oopsies". The monetary value has never been important. We never viewed them as investments for resale. Danny always said he simply appreciated the artistry of the objects.

Upon moving to Tucson, Danny and I decided that we would continue the tradition of putting out only some of the glass. To date, we have twelve large plastic bins of bubble wrapped glass on IKEA shelves in our garage. At this point, I suppose you could say we have a lovely collection of plastic bins as well.

Maybe, some day, we will donate all the glass to a museum. Danny even suggested we should do what his Aunt Andrea did and sell the glass one piece at a time on eBay. I'm not sure I have that much focus or fortitude to follow through with that idea. But, maybe ... someday.

The second grouping in our house is of pictures made out of painted slats of lath wood. Lath wood is what "they" used to use behind plaster walls in order to hold the plaster in place as well as using it for snow fencing. Well, an artist named Theodore DeGroot (he signed all his work, "degroot") created an industry of pictures made out of this medium. There are scenes of towns and farms, ghost towns and mansions. He also did room interiors and a still life or two. He especially focused on depictions of seascapes.

Danny saw his first picture when he initially moved to Washington, DC to work at the USDA. He had gone to an Ethan Allen store to find furniture for his first apartment. That is where he bought his very first degroot; and he never stopped.

At last count, we had 61 pictures. That amount was manageable when we lived in DC in a three story row house plus owning a cabin in West Virginia. There seemed to be enough wall space available to find a place for ALL that art. However when we moved to Tucson, only half of our degroots went on display. The other 30 pictures are now "resting" under the bed in our bedroom. Maybe we will begin to sell them one piece at a time on eBay as well. Probably not. (See above "cranberry opalescent hobnail glass".)

When Danny and I first moved in with each other, he thought it would be nice if I began collecting something of my own. Knowing my history of sewing, he bought me a beautiful porcelain, delicately painted thimble. It was a truly thoughtful and loving gift. However, as I said before, I never was a collector, so the idea wasn't really in my wheelhouse.

However, one year, he struck on a collecting concept that he knew would appeal to my inner cheap-skated-ness. For Christmas, he gave me a set of silver proof coins issued by the U.S. Mint for that year. In addition, he included a couple of the "commemorative" coins the Mint distributed for that year. I was smitten with the idea! Since then, every Christmas, he gives me the proof, silver proof and commemorative sets for that current year. I love the gesture, not only because the gift comes from Danny, but it allows me to be a passive collector. I don't have to do anything to increase my stockpile except wait for the next Christmas to roll around.

Perfect!

Although, I have to admit, I still don't FEEL as though I am "genuine" collector. I really don't have that history.

However, come to think of it, in the mid-1960's, I loved spending a \$1.00 each week with allowance money for a particular brand of "put-it-together-yourself" model toy car. I loved assembling and painting a new one every week. I must admit, I acquired quite a large grouping of them.

Now that I am pondering, when I was a kid, I did collect "Fantastic Four" comic books. At one point, I had almost the entire set of 1 through 125 plus the first seven "Annual" editions that Marvel Comics put out. I sold them in 1978 to cover the entire down payment and first month's rent for one of my early apartments in New York City!

There was also my assemblage of every single American produced Beatles albums (plus a few British ones). I even had some really rare ones. I sold them for quite a good price when we moved to Tucson.

AND, I kept hundreds of Playbills of shows I had seen over my lifetime. For years, they shared a space in boxes under our basement steps along with the extra cranberry, opalescent hobnail glass.

Hmmmmmm ...

Could it be? ALL this time, I've been in DENIAL????

I suppose I WAS a collector after all! Thinking about these items that brought me so much joy, I really WAS an accumulator of objects. Funny how I didn't realize it until just now.

Then, what was my excuse when the opportunity to collect thimbles appeared?

I guess I was just cheap and lazy! Well, at least this little epiphany of mine has helped put things into perspective for me.

So what do I collect now? Coins? Not really. Danny does that for me.

I know!

Looking at what I have been focusing on this past year, I suppose one would say I collect memories. Yes, I am a procurer of tales; not only from my past, but from my family and friends; and especially from Danny! I now have sets and volumes of memories laid down. Now this is a collection I can live with!

And who knows? After I am gone, perhaps my collection will be passed on to the next generation. Maybe they will be inspired to collect a few memories of their own.

At least, they won't be able to sell them on eBay.

Hoarding from the heart,
Ye Olde Memory Keeper

Tres Chic

After I wrote about all that sewing I've done to enhance interiors and the ensembles for folks other than myself, I got to ruminating ... it's strange I never sewed anything for my own usage ... well nothing that I would wear out in public. However, looking back, I never thought my lack of making clothes for myself was odd. It simply wasn't something that ever occurred to me to do!

Funny.

But it wasn't that I didn't care what I looked like. Even as a youthfully, young youngster, I was always focused on what was "on trend" and what I wore. Maybe I subconsciously considered anything homemade somehow less than perfect; even though I really admired the outfits sewn by my long suffering mother and my friends at school. In my mind, "store bought" was more akin to a fashion atelier than the basic sewing machine on our kitchen table. I was never taught that particular "prejudicial" line of thought. It was just something my little skewed brain dreamed up.

So, even as a wee one, I wanted to be "fashionable". That meant the best clothes Sears could provide. Actually, in Schenectady, where I grew up, it was the downtown Carl Company store my mother took us to buy all our clothes. And later, in the mid-Sixties, after the Mohawk Mall was built, the Two Guys Department Store became our designated source of procurement.

When you consider that I was born in 1954, I lived through the height of the 1950's, 1960's, 1970's and 1980's. And, dontcha know, I had some choice outfits that represented the fashion trends of each era.

Even when I started in kindergarten in 1959, my appearance was very important to me. I remember standing in front of the mirror in the boys restroom, wetting, combing and re-combing my curly hair in order to get it to fall into just the perfect pompadour hairdo. It didn't help that I had some "baby's first symptoms" of OCD even at that age. I obsessed on the idea of my hair HAVING to look exactly like Ricky Nelson's, the teenage son of Ozzie and Harriet on television. Unfortunately, when my hair dried, my natural curls took over and ruined all my efforts. Then I would, once again, ask permission to use the restroom in order to correct the problem. I don't think any of my teachers caught on.

Anyway, back to clothes.

I remember an ensemble I put together in the very early Sixties, when the influence of the Fifties of bouffant hairdos and tight pants still held sway. I had convinced my mother to allow me to get the TIGHTEST white pants known to humanity. I had to lay down on my bed just to get them on over my little butt. Once I got them

passed my booty, I definitely tried not to sit down. It was too painful. But, while I was standing, I thought they looked mighty fine. I paired those pants with a cotton, short-sleeved, buttoned-up, collared shirt of bright yellow with big black polka-dots. Polka dots were very trendy in the 1960's and I have never lost my love of them. The ensemble was completed with a skinny black belt and black penny loafers. I thought I was the cutest eight-year-old this side of the Mohawk River.

Next came the rise of the "Mod" look. Think of Twiggy, mini-skirts and go-go boots. People tend to think of the Sixties as a time of the Hippies. But Hippie fashion didn't take hold in the main stream until later in the decade. Guys were generally "afraid " to let their hair grow too long and appear too "radical". The male "Mods" wore tailored bell bottom pants, turtle necks with a simple chain or two and hair reminiscent of the early Beatles. And, of course, Nehru jackets.

Jawaharlal Nehru was the Prime minister of India from the late 1940's thru the early 1960's. He always wore a coat that buttoned all the way up to his neck. The collar stood straight up, with a small gap in the front, not unlike a clerical collar. Anyway, it became all the rage.

Now we didn't have the money to buy little Stevie a Nehru jacket. However, there was enough in the home coffers to procure a Nehru shirt ... in bright orange. The garment was scandalous because it wasn't made to tuck into the waist of one's pants like a "normal" dress shirt. The shirt draped over the hips, like an ersatz dress ... shocking by Western standards. I wore it with a white dickey. A dickey was worn if you wanted it to seem like you were wearing a turtleneck sweater under your shirt. However, the dickey itself was only the collar of the "turtleneck" with a flap of cloth in the front and back, making it LOOK as though you were wearing an entire shirt. At the time, the look was "cool", both fashionably and thermally speaking.

Of course, time came when I had to give up my circulation constraining pants. I remember my first pair of bell bottoms. They looked like they were made of cotton denim, but were of a deluxe double knit polyester. I recall the odd feeling they gave me the first time I donned them. The waist was low. After the waist hugging pants of my earlier years, they felt as though they almost would slide off past my buttocks and expose my Fruit of the Loom "tighty whities" to the world. Thank goodness for my new three inch wide belt with the HUGE buckle to come to my rescue. I also remember the odd sensation of not feeling any cloth around my lower legs ... that is, except when I walked. Then, when I moved, the things made an unfamiliar flapping motion against my calves. I LOVED them!

It was around that time I also dumped the pompadour hair. I asked my hair dresser dad to style it into a cut that resembled Mr. Spock's from "Star Trek". Actually, I

wanted a Beatle haircut, but I knew it would be “pushing the envelope” if I asked. Long hair was still taboo in the suburbs in the mid Sixties.

Finally, as we ended that decade, the establishment relaxed enough to allow “the Hippie look” to become part of the main stream. Much to the consternation of my maternal grandfather who had lived his life as a conservative guy working in construction, my parents gave me permission to grow my hair to my shoulders. The problem for me was I still had really curly “poodle-like” hair. The style at the time that was most popular featured long, straight blonde “surfer-dude” hair. I knew I was never going to be a blonde, but could attempt achieving the “straight” aspect. So every night, I would thoroughly wet my hair and pull it back into a ponytail with a rubber band. Then, I took an old pair of pantyhose of my mother’s in which I had cut off the legs and stretched the remaining “seat” over my hair. THEN, I donned a tight knitted “ski cap” over the pantyhose. With everything in place, I went to bed. Oh the price we pay for being in style. It didn’t matter what time of year it was. That “ski cap” got HOT in the summer! I wore that contraption on my head at night for YEARS. There were two problems with the concept. One: because the pony tail wasn’t smashed down under the pantyhose and cap, when I combed everything out in the morning, I always ended up with a “That Girl” Marlo Thomas flip at the end of my hair. And Two: any kind of moisture in the air would undo the whole effort and I would end the day looking like I had gone through an entire wash and spin cycle.

Who said fashion was easy?

And then, the Seventies happened! Can you say “Disco Queen”?

Ohhhh, my platform shoes! Nirvana! Of course, my primary dress shoes were ever so tasteful. They were almost black with a tinge of brown in the leather; and 5 inch heels! They paired beautifully with either of my black or brown, double knit, polyester pants with the deep three inch cuffs at the bottom of each leg.

The big revelation for me with platform shoes was, for the first and only time in my life, I felt tall! I remember one occasion when I was wearing them, I was able to put my arm around the shoulders of a dear female friend who had always been a good head taller than me. But here I was, high enough to wrap my arm around her shoulders! I can recall thinking, “So this is what a straight guy feels like!” That new perspective gave me a glimpse into another world. The new found height certainly didn’t change my sexuality, especially considering my next two pairs of shoes were four inch wedgies; one pair looking like spats, only in blue and cream and the other in bright orange. Not so masculine.

And I HAD to have a Nik-Nik shirt. These were dress shirts made from a silky polyester/rayon contrivance. They always had a wild print of some kind embossed on

them. However, because of the silky nature of the fabric, Nik-Nik shirts were kind of revealing. The big problem with these shirts was that they may have looked good, but the material didn't "breathe". They were hot as Hades. Plus, after a few wearings, boy-Howdy did they STINK! No matter how many times one washed them, the reek of sweat and body odor never went away!

As a result, in the Seventies, I wore those kind of shirts only occasionally. Mostly I tended to wear trendy, long-sleeved tee shirts and cowl neck sweaters. Of course, they ALWAYS had to be complimented with a cotton scarf knotted at the neck or a chain or some tasteful pooka beads. Pooka beads were a necklace of small, cream colored shells usually worn by men in the disco era. De rigueur, baby!

Oh! And my hair? It finally gave way to the afro. What people were spending hundreds of dollars to attain at the hairdresser (unisex, of course), I achieved naturally. As a matter of fact, my college yearbook picture is of me with my afro, wearing a high necked turtleneck and a white cowl necked sweater.

HOW could ANYONE be more fashionable than that???

As time went on, fashions continued to change. In the Eighties, I tried to keep up with big shoulders on my jackets, black jeans with rolled cuffs, skinny ties and an occasional safety pin or four attached to my shirts. My afro evolved into just the curls on top and slicked sides; very Maureen McGovern (...the singer who crooned "There's Got to be a Morning After" from the hit movie "The Poseidon Adventure").

Eventually, I shaved off all my hair and gracefully grew bald. My penchant for fashion moved into a desire for comfort. These days, I like to remain color coordinated, but I don't compromise physical well-being with overly snug accoutrements. Such is the relief one gets from getting older.

Yes, fashions change and fads come and go. Through my life, I had fun immersing myself in all the trends. However, these days, I am laying back and allowing the "culture bus" to pass me by. Although I had so much interest in the modes of each era and even have kept a few pieces from each decade, my codger-dom has let that part of my personality go. Of course, being a cheap, old coot, I still wear them. Yes, believe it or not, my body has not changed that much from my high school days and I can comfortably don the shirts and sweaters I still have in my closet from all those years ago. They may no longer be in fashion, but being old means "I couldn't give a hoot!"

I've decided there are more important things to focus on: getting up in the morning and deciding what I am going to have for dinner.

Keeping myself together,
A comfortable old guy

Coats of many colors

When my darling Danny read my last installment, he commented that he was surprised I had not mentioned anything about my coats or jackets. From the eighty-two years we have been together (calculated in gay years), he knew I had accumulated quite a significant array of coats. And he was absolutely correct! Through the years, I HAD a tendency to focus on the importance of my jackets. However, unlike my last written foray into my lifelong obsession of fashion, I liked my coats, not so much for looking stylish, although some of them DID look mighty smart, but because, all my life, I was cold!

I'm a little fella; not much meat on them bones. When I graduated from high school, I only weighed 100 pounds ... really! And college wasn't much better. Upon receiving my Bachelor in Dramatic Arts degree, I still barely topped 110 pounds.

Little!

To this day, I'm lucky if I achieve 130 pounds.

I realize some of you are scoffing in my direction right now; either disbelieving or deriding me. But I can't help the facts. I've always had difficulty putting on weight and my lack of padding makes it hard for me to stay warm. Why the bloody blazes do you think I moved to Tucson? I could no longer stand the cold in Washington, DC! And Washington, DC doesn't always get that cold!

Anyway, I also had a special affection for some of my jackets because I procured them at a REEEEEALLY low price. That fact alone made me love them from my little cheap heart.

Of course, growing up, I wasn't concerned about the price of my outerwear. That onus fell to the pursestrings of my parents. In my younger years, I just wanted to somehow stay warm through the brutal upstate New York winters. My quilted snow suit was my best friend. There was many a cold Halloween night I wore it under my costume. Once winter rolled around, I could be seen wearing my snowsuit PLUS a heavy coat over it ... and scarves ... and TWO hats ... and a pair of mittens OVER a pair of gloves! I hated being cold!

I must add, however, my fashion sense always saw that all my garments were black; with a slight hint of yellow or red in my scarves. After all, I may have been freezing, but I wasn't going to be un-modish.

I remember the first overcoat I bought on my own. I was going off to college in 1972 and I wanted something new. I had saved some money from my years of working at Gaslight Village, an 1890's motif-ed theme park I worked at in my high school years. The coat I chose was a black, faux leather bomber jacket with an equally faux fur collar. I

admit, it could have been warmer, but I wanted to send myself off to college in style. And besides, the eighteen sweaters and fifty-nine scarves I wore underneath it made up for it's lack of satisfactory insulation.

About mid-way through college, puffy, down overcoats were juuuuust coming into style. I KNEW the warmth offered by the feathers of hundreds of deceased ducks was the answer for me, so I asked for one such coat for Christmas. My long suffering mother came through. However, for some reason, she purchased one in neon, lime green. I still can't remember why. It was so unlike me, BUT it was delightfully warm. I decided the warmth it offered was more important than its hue and added it to my wardrobe.

That coat probably saved my life one cold winter night ... and it wasn't because of its insulation properties.

I had moved to New York City in August of 1977. A few months later, with the onset of winter, the weather grew bitterly cold and harsh. One particular December evening, after a heavy snow storm had passed, I was dressed in hundreds of layers, capped off by my puffy, padded, lime green down coat. I was outside my apartment, about to cross the street when I slipped on some ice. At the same time, a taxi was rounding the corner right in front of me. Instead of falling under its wheels and becoming one with the pavement, I bounced! I rolled down the entire length of the vehicle and was launched into a snow bank! I was completely unhurt. My extra puffy, padded, lime green down coat had saved me from oblivion!

However, in spite of the good fortune offered by that jacket, I wanted some alternative outerwear. My puffy, lime green coat had always been a little too neon for me. And my faux fabric leather jacket (which I still owned) looked a little too much like something the leather crowd in "The West Village" section of the City would wear.

Fortunately for me, in those days, New York City was still teeming with vintage and second-hand clothing stores. The greedy landlords had not yet squeezed out all the "Mom and Pop" shops with sky-high rents. I found, what I thought was the coolest 1940's style Eisenhower jacket made of military, olive green wool that belted at the waist. I knew I looked cute in that thing. Unfortunately, I discovered it may have been easy on the eyes, but was crappy in the cold. Even when I tried to cram as many layers under it, the wind just whipped through me. I realized this coat was a bad choice overall.

Although, I did have a "unique" experience one January night while I was wearing that coat. I was walking just outside Times Square on my way to meet a friend at a piano bar. ("Piano bar" was insider's code word for "gay bar" .) I had on my little Eisenhower jacket with a very long black and yellow striped scarf wrapped around my neck. I wore a black, knitted head band so as to protect my ears, yet let my curly hair pop

through the top. I finished off the outfit with my tightest black pants that showed off my little butt, but still draped down my leg into wide bell bottoms and, of course, my black platform shoes. As I was just about to cross Eighth Avenue around 46th Street, a prostitute came up to me and said, "Hey mister! You want to have a date?" Poor thing, I laughed in her face and said, "Boy, do you have the wrong customer!" I mean come ooon! For Pete's sake, I was dressed for a rendezvous-vous at a gay bar! Honestly, I wasn't the most masculine looking fella on the street that night. And I knew it! She was either REALLY desperate or needed to have her eyes checked.

"Date" indeed!

And then I found the coat of my dreams. Not only was it warm as heck, it was enormously on trend. And ... BEST of all ... it was really CHEAP! I found it in a second hand clothing store in the East Village. The shop was one of those establishments that sat just under the level of the sidewalk so that you had to walk down some steps in order to go in. The coat was hanging on a rack toward the back of the store, along with many other overcoats. As soon as I saw it, I KNEW it was the one. If it fit, it was mine. It fit. I bought it.

It was a circa 1950 coat, very boxy with wide shoulders and deep lapels. It hung to my mid-calf. And the best part was that it was made of a very hefty, artificially fuzzy material not unlike bear's fur, but in a dark gray. The garment was very, very heavy and very, very warm. And, as things were in those days, it was quite inexpensive. I don't think I spent more than thirty dollars on it. Whenever I wore it, I felt like I was wrapping myself in a protective comforter. I liked to pair it with a black fedora I found at another used clothing shop.

Up until that point, I usually didn't wear hats. With my curly hair, they gave me "hat hair". I stuck to headbands, like the one I was wearing when I almost made some prostitute's night. However, when I changed my hairdo to the slicked sides with just the curls on top, the fedora worked great because the curls fit perfectly into the crown on the hat.

The down side of all of this was that the look of the black hat and oversized overcoat made me look a little sinister. Or, even a bit like a flasher about to show his "stuff" to some unsuspecting victim. Actually, I had an incident on a subway that made me seem a little too much like the latter description.

At the time, I liked to think it was "cool" to ride on the subway standing up, but not hold on to anything for stabilization. Stupid, I know. Chalk it up to the folly of youth. Anyway, one winter night, there I was, riding the subway in my "flasher" outfit without holding onto anything. The train was just pulling into "my" station when it abruptly stopped. As I was falling, I thrust my hand out to steady myself and my palm

landed directly onto the breast of the woman standing next to me. As she clutched herself, our eyes met. She was NOT happy with me. Her eyes were quite accusatory. I thought of explaining that I was COMPLETELY gay and I wanted nothing to do with her body parts. However, instead I just mumbled an “excuse me”, put my head down and fled out of the just opened doors.

Sometimes it's best not to go into details with a stranger.

I wore that coat until it fell apart. Even my sewing skills couldn't repair the fact that the material was looking like it had mangle.

Oh, well. It was wonderful while it lasted.

I recall getting a coat from my darling Danny when we first got together.

Walmart stores were being built all up and down the East coast. However, I was determined not to go into one. In my snobby, prejudicial mind, Walmarts were for the lowest of the low. I pictured the stores filled with toothless, overweight, uneducated masses. I was none of those and didn't wish to be mistaken for one.

That said, Danny's folks had come to visit us. Because his parents lived in a very rural area, his mom always LOVED to check out any stores around us. Besides loving to shop, this was to see what was available that she, otherwise, had a hard time getting back home.

Anyway, on one particular outing with them, for the first time, I found myself in a Walmart. I first looked around myself when I entered in order to make sure no one I knew saw me. Of course, if someone I knew DID see me, it was BECAUSE THEY WERE THERE TOO.

What struck me was how clean and well-stocked the store was. And then I saw the prices. The cost of everything was so much less than any store I had ever been in. My little cheapskate heart began to beat faster. I found myself reeling from shelf to rack, saying, “Look how cheap this is!” or “I can't believe the price!”

However, I was stopped dead in my tracks when I got into the Men's Clothing section and saw a coat staring at me with a price of sixteen dollars. “SIXTEEN DOLLARS!!!” It was a denim bomber jacket with a very heavily padded, quilted lining. The denim was very slightly acid-washed so that the fabric appeared only a bit faded. When I tried it on, I was even more shocked to find it fit me perfectly. I kept repeating (obnoxiously so) “Sixteen dollars! It's only sixteen dollars! How can it be only sixteen dollars?” I asked Danny if I should get it. Of course, Danny leapt at the idea of buying something for me. Because I have such a miserly history, I hardly ever get anything new for myself. He heartily said he would buy it for me; partially because he loved me and probably also to get me to shut up about the “sixteen dollars”.

That became my “go to” coat for years. And, like any other coat I owned, I wore it down to a rag and a prayer. I hated to give the thing up. But, at the end of it’s life, it looked more like something I found at a camp for the homeless than a department store.

The coat I am currently eroding away is also a bomber-style jacket. It’s a throwback to the black, faux leather coat I owned all those years ago. I found it on a bargain rack in a Filene’s Basement when visiting my parents in Schenectady. It was something like twenty-five dollars. I had trouble trying it on from the happy-dance I was doing. Unlike that old jacket from my college years, this one is genuine leather suede. It is collarless with a quilted lining. I’ve already worn it so much, I’ve sewn the sleeves back together, done a leather repair on the shoulder and replaced the zipper. Being nimble with a needle makes it handy when one is cheap.

There is another bomber jacket of a heavy brown canvas and a hood I have hanging in my closet. It looks like something a farmhand would wear rather than little ol’ me. Not that there is anything wrong with that. The coat is just a little too masculine for my tastes. Danny knew I was needing to do repairs on my black suede, so he was encouraging me to buy a new coat. One time, when we still had our cabin in West Virginia, we were in a Tractor Supply Store in a neighboring town 20 miles over the mountain from our cabin. He saw the coat and enthusiastically encouraged me to get it. Even though it wasn’t my style and it wasn’t black or gray, but because I loved him, I let him get it for me. I confess, it IS warm. And I wear it, especially when I feel the need to go incognito into another Tractor Store and blend in.

However, as an aside, a true advantage of going into a Tractor Supply Store is that they carry blue jeans that are lined in flannel. I have two pair; one in blue denim and another in brown. You see, one can find items that are warm and stylish even in the most unexpected places.

So, as you can surmise, each item of outerwear I have owned has not only given me protection and comfort, they each have a story attached to them. Looking back, I find it interesting that most pieces of clothing I own have a tale to tell. However, in the future, I will need to be careful to keep a lid on the anecdotes coming from my underwear drawer.

Warmly yours,
In sheep’s clothing

Alright, then.

It's time I finally talked about the elephant in the room: COVID-19. Not to make light of the subject. Of course, it isn't funny. Dan lost a younger first cousin and we lost three older church friends to the disease. It is very serious and very, very personal. My 94 year old dad got the disease in December at the assisted living facility in which he is staying. Fortunately, he only had symptoms for a few days and, even then, the manifestation wasn't that bad. The only reason he went to the emergency room was because of his age. Before we even knew it, the hospital put him in a cab after midnight and sent him home without even admitting him. Due, in part, to there being no available beds. In spite of this, after three weeks, he tested negative. It certainly was quite a scare.

However, with all that occurred involving the disease over this past year, I REFUSED to let it get me down. I wouldn't and couldn't let it get the best of me. Survival of the fittest and all that "stuff".

So, here's my take on the subject. These are the events as we experienced them.

Since March of 2020, like most sensible people, my darling Danny and I have been double masking, relentlessly washing our hands and social distancing. Until he decided to fully retire in January 2021, Danny was able to teach his University of Arizona classes online at home. I was retired, so isolation was no big sacrifice for me. That is, unless we went out for grocery shopping. The half-hour or so of going through a self-decontamination when we returned home became a regular ritual. I know, because of my OCD, that deed truly did not bother me. I didn't mind taking my daily shower at 4:30 in the afternoon. I would have, otherwise, only been napping.

Danny and I gave up our three theatre company subscriptions, our concert attendances, our Tuesday date nights at the movies (senior discount Tuesday's, baby) and our regular dinners out with our friend Fran. The money we saved was ridiculous! We slipped into a routine of days working around the house, Danny riding his bicycle or his horse, me occasionally taking a spin on my stationary bike, my afternoon nap at 4:30, meeting on our screened in porch for wine or beer at 5:30 to chat about our day and cooking dinner at home or swooping out for some take-out food just a five minute drive from our house by golf cart to our local Mountainview Bar and Grill here in SaddleBrooke. Our day ended with the ABC Evening News, watching one recorded show (usually involving a veterinarian of some sort), then toddling off into our separate corners for some deep online viewing or listening to music.

Oh! And, of course, during this COVID-19 situation, if you remember, there was a HUGE fire last June that was all too close to our little home. That is what started these blog-things in the first place! I cranked these offerings out every day from June to August and every Tuesday and Friday from August through now. THAT alone kept me busy!

As a result, we found there was something about settling into a rut that had an unexpected appeal. There was comfort in the ordinary!

That said, our complacency was shaken when the promise of a vaccine appeared on the horizon. We were rarin' and ready to jump! But then the reality of the age restrictions took over our enthusiasm. At 65 and 66, we weren't old enough! What?

Dad had received both his shots simply because he was at an assisted living facility. So, even though we weren't yet eligible, I tried to to get an appointment for our friend Fran who (as they say) is a woman of a certain age with a limited skill in the delicacies of the internet. Well, like all of YOU, the search for an appointment became a crazy game of "Whack-a-Mole". I'd hear about some store or pharmacy that was offering the shots, get on their online page only to get booted off five or six times. Then try again, only to discover the nearest place that still had appointments was somewhere in Florida! (Sound familiar?)

Meanwhile, we heard through our association's gay organization that the state of Arizona would be offering the vaccine to ages 65 or older through our local pharmacy at our Mini-Mart here in SaddleBrooke. The caveat was that no one was sure when the vaccine would arrive. So, of course, we immediately put ourselves on a waiting list and ... well ... waited. After a couple of weeks went by, we received notice that the shots were commencing HOWEVER only for ages 85 or older. (You need to remember this is a retirement community. There are a HECK of a lot of 85 year olds hanging around here.) So we waited a couple more weeks. Then word came that the 75 or older group was now eligible. However, the folks in charge discovered they weren't receiving enough vaccine for that age group, so they upped the ante to 77 or older. But, by this time, it was also time to give the 85 and older crowd their second shots.

Patience ... patience ...

THEN, one morning, Heaven's shining light beamed onto my iPhone. I received an email from Walgreens saying that they were getting the vaccine and to "make your appointment soon". The very night before, I had heard from David Muir (again, good ol' ABC News) that selected pharmacies across the country were getting the vaccine from the federal government. This meant immediate gratification for the 65 or older peeps. I IMMEDIATELY got on my iPad, but was bumped out. Tried again ... bumped. Tried again ... froze on an opening page. Meanwhile, Danny was trying on his computer and

got in right away. Not only did he get an appointment for his first shot, he was given the same time one month later for his second shot. He told me to forget the iPad and try his device. And it WORKED! I got the very next appointment time after his. We were delighted! Our next thought was, "let's get one for Fran"!!!

However, when we tried, their system crashed. It looked like poor Frannie was out of luck AGAIN! But we persevered. All day, as Danny was doing other things on his computer, he kept refreshing the site. After HOURS of "please try again" ... VOILA! He got on! The only wacky thing was, by that time, the Walgreens we were trying for had no more appointments. We ended up getting a spot for her first and second shots the day after ours at two different Walgreens nearby. Who cared? As long as she was able to get them!

Yes, yes, be assured, with our Walgreens appointments under our belts, I took Danny and my names off the SaddleBrooke waiting list. After all, we were done waiting. Plus we wanted to make "room" for anyone else who was trying to snag an appointment.

Long story short(-ish), Danny, Frannie and I all got our first dose in mid-February and our second in mid-March. Frannie had no trouble figuring out where to go for her vaccines. She and I did a test run to surmise where she was going for her first and then she did a test run for her second.

Of course, of the three of us, I was the only one to feel "THE" next day after effects of the vaccine. Both Danny and Fran were FINE! I got the fever, chills, nausea, headache ... the whole "nine yards". (Some of you may know what I am talking about.) I woke up feeling fine, but while making myself breakfast, I was swept by an overwhelming wave of nausea that sent me running to the bathroom. I went downhill fast and I spent the rest of the day in bed. Next day, however, I felt completely fine. Thank goodness.

Now, the three of us are waiting for our two week "grace period" to pass for our immunity to fully kick in. We are anticipating the moment because we are actually going to have our first dinner out together in a year. I've even made our reservation. It will be exactly two weeks to the day from our second shot.

The restaurant is a lovely, old world Italian "ristorante", situated on a hill with a panoramic view of downtown Tucson. When I called and asked for a window table, the hostess said they were busy that night and couldn't guarantee it. I said, "Look. We are celebrating our first dinner out together in over a year and we chose YOUR restaurant to honor the occasion." She said, "I'm writing this all down."

I think we'll get a window spot.

So now, as Danny and I contemplate our lives as we ease up a little on our paranoia, we are actually a little sad we have the opportunity to re-start our existence as it was before COVID-19.

We've decided, doing ALL those extracurricular activities were fun at the time, but we realized we were running ourselves ragged. The crazy thing about altering our behavior because of COVID-19, is we learned to slow down and enjoy our senior years at a more leisurely pace. No more theatre subscriptions. If we want to see one particular show, we'll go. But we don't need to see ALL of them. More dinners at home are swell. And it has been really nice regrouping at the end of the day and chatting with each other. That said, our Tuesday movie nights might return. After all, who can resist a film for five dollars?

Obviously, the isolation hadn't changed everything. I'm still cheap.

Bursting his chains,
An almost freed man

The Stuff That Dreams are Made of

I dream in color.

And not just ordinary, every day color. I mean vivid, 1940's, saturated technicolor. I don't know why. It simply has always been that way. I am aware not everybody experiences their dreams in color, much less remember them. However, for those folks who do recall their dreams, many such people only "see" in varying shades of gray. I suppose the images conjured in their heads are more like a film noir movie with Humphrey Bogart accusing Mary Astor of murder. With me, I get Dorothy Gale after the tornado, opening her front door onto Munchkinland.

Come to think of it, my dreams are incredibly cinematic. It's almost as though the storylines have been commissioned in advance by some unseen movie mogul. Sometimes I get complete motion picture productions with fully realized scripts, lighting effects and an invisible director leading the action. There has been many a time I have awoken, just to say out loud to myself, "What was THAT???"

Over the years, I have experienced alien invasions, huge theatrical stage productions, end of civilization scenarios and spy thrillers. And, saying this with no exaggeration, every dream is thoroughly entertaining. It's as if I have laid down my \$15 (\$5 on senior discount Tuesdays) and watched the whole thing from the comfort of a lounge chair style seat.

Now, oftentimes, I am in the action itself; directly involved and not a passive viewer. Unfortunately, sometimes those are the "anxiety" dreams where dress rehearsal for a new musical is about to begin and I haven't a clue what my lines or choreography are. In those situations, the rest of the cast usually doesn't like me and I am left feeling completely inadequate. Those are the "films" I don't mind walking out of.

However, it's the Cecil B. DeMille epics I so thoroughly enjoy. I awaken amazed and wondering where my little pea brain came up with that particular idea.

For example, just last night, I was a police detective on the trail of a serial killer. Being I was a gay man, I had been specifically chosen for the job because all the victims were of a gay proclivity. It was assumed the murderer had met each individual at either a gay bar or restaurant that catered to a homosexual crowd and went home with them. That was because each victim had been discovered in their own homes with no sign of forced entry. Each casualty was found with his throat cut. (It's dreams like these where the "technicolor" aspect is not so entrancing).

Anyway, after I was assigned the case, the odd thing that I "discovered" was that every man was completely clothed with no sign of foreplay. If the ruse was supposedly

romantic, why was each victim not even a little dishevelled? Tucking that oddity away in the back of my mind, I began my investigation.

As the dream went on, there were different “scenes” in bars and restaurants where I, as the investigator, spoke to friends and acquaintances of the murdered men. I found some guys more suspicious than others, but nothing that seemed to warrant them being a murderer.

There even was a chase scene where one piano bar patron I was interviewing suddenly bolted from where he was seated and fled out the sliding glass doors that led onto a second floor patio. Pushing through the surprised patrons standing out there, he leapt over the wrought iron fence and jumped to the street below. Giving chase, I, with the help of a couple of friends I had known who happened to be at the bar, ran after him. After many alleyways and close calls dodging traffic, we cornered him in a blind alley. It was there he confessed. However, it wasn't for the murders. He said he ran because he had a criminal record and had done jail time. Because he knew a few of the murder victims, he was afraid he would be a suspect and didn't want to go back to jail.

Accepting that excuse, which seemed reasonable in the dream, he ended up exposing another piece of the puzzle a few days later.

Continuing my investigation, I found myself back at that same piano bar. Encountering that aforementioned skittish runaway, he apologized for fleeing from me. He said he had had too much to drink that day and his nerves got the best of him. He also mentioned that he thought it wasn't fair that, just because he knew a few of the men, he was a suspect. He repeated it wasn't fair because “she” ... pointing out a woman in her thirties on the other side of the bar ... “she” knew all the guys who were killed and nobody suspected her.

Walking over to her, I discovered her name was Molly. And she, indeed, knew all the victims. I surmised Molly was a typical ... what one would not-so-nicely call ... a “fag-hag”; a female that hung out exclusively with gay men. She looked, as the saying goes, “like she was rode hard and put away wet”. She had on a little too much makeup and was fairly drunk. She was also smoking these weird skinny, brown cigarettes I hadn't seen since the 1970's. I was hoping, because of her connections with the guys, she might have seen them “picking up” the same person. She said she vaguely remembered this one man who she didn't know, who would come in and not speak to anyone, but just hung out on the side and watched people. She said she always thought he seemed weird. After she described him as best she could, I put an a/p/b (“all points bulletin”) out on him. I even had Molly go down to the police department to see if she could identify him from mug shots. Unfortunately, she couldn't be sure. I surmised she

was a little too tipsy, even in mid-day, to be able to identify anybody, including her own mother. Also, regrettably, the a/p/b came to nothing.

As bad luck would have it, another murder occurred. I was able to get to the crime scene before it was “cleaned up”. Looking at the poor fellow, I could tell he probably had been a bit of a party guy. There was lots of booze and some drug paraphernalia on the messy coffee table.

That is when I saw the dirty ashtray. In among the piles of ash were two, tamped out, oddly thin, brown cigarette butts.

It was HER! It was MOLLY! That was why the men never looked like they were in a pre-coital state. She wasn't there to seduce them. She was there to kill them!

That was a plot “twist” I did not know was coming!

I had been looking for a MAN who had been going home with these guys. But it was Molly all along!

Searching her out, I found her back at the piano bar, very drunk and very loud. When I attempted to arrest her, she tried to run away, but was too inebriated to function and she stumbled. Picking her up, she confessed to the murders in a tirade of filth, anger and hatred. She blamed her inability to get a boyfriend on the all the gays; calling them a waste of flesh. Her motive was to make herself feel better about her fragile state by getting rid of the imagined source of her self-inflicted misery.

And then I woke up.

How's THAT for a dream?

Again, I have NO idea where it came from. These episodes simply happen. However, most of the time, the details of a dream fade a couple of hours after I wake up. That is, unless I purposefully focus on the reverie when I awake. Then it usually sticks in my memory bank. I think that is why I remembered this dream so well. Because of this very blog-thing, I knew I wanted to write about my dreaming and, in my half-sleep, thought it would be a good example to later on evoke.

Anywho, this is just one in a long line of extraordinary dreams I have experienced over the years.

For those who may think this is all contrived, you need to walk in my shoes. Or, in a manner of speaking, sleep in my bed. I honestly experience this kind of phenomenon virtually every night. I am not laying there in a state of awareness thinking up these tales. The sagas develop while I am in a very deep sleep. And I NEED a lot of sleep; nine to ten hours, at LEAST! Maybe that's because of all the output my unconscious brain is creating.

People have asked me why I don't write these epics down. I know I should, however, most of the time, I don't make note of them because I am simply lazy. Or I

procrastinate, convincing myself I will scribble them down “later”. But, by the time later comes around, I’ve forgotten most of the dream.

Well, maybe now that I am writing a whole bunch these days, I will be motivated to, at least, jot down the plot line. That way, I will have SOME kind of reference for future use. Even if the specifics have dissipated, I’ll have something on which to anchor a story.

Yes, that’s the ticket. Maybe I will do just that. Maybe I will do that ... “later”. But, for now, I will just enjoy the free entertainment.

No admission charge needed,
A dreamer

Animal Antics

I KNOW in the past I've written about the wildlife around our house here in SaddleBrooke. We regularly see deer, coyotes and a multitude of little creatures. This is sometimes punctuated by surprise sightings of bobcats (known down here as wild cats) and javelinas (peccaries).

However, recently, I've observed the usual animals doing some unusual things. And I thought you'd like to know about a few of these incidents.

Our house backs up onto, what we refer to as a glorified "wash". It actually is a man made area created to direct rain water away from the homes, lined by a natural, untouched space. This is where no houses have been built and looks pretty well like it did before these homesteads were plunked down in the middle of it all. Our "wash" includes a hill that rises up behind all the houses on our street, parallel to the road in front of the houses. As a result, when we look out beyond our back yard, all we see are cacti and other native plants. This is the same when we look to the right or left. The nice thing about this design is that all the houses behind ours are set up on top of the hill and almost out of our view. Yes, we can still see them, however, when we are indoors, when we look out our windows, we mostly see only the desert flora.

And, of course, the desert fauna.

The first incident of animal shenanigans isn't all that out of the ordinary, but is a source of consternation to both me and my darling Danny.

The deer use the "wash" as an animal highway. However, we have found it is less of a highway and more of a buffet line. The deer enjoy moving from yard to yard using this "wash" as a means of access, surmising what would be tasty for that day's meal. There are a few very large, green bushes in our yard on the side of our property within our back fence. The fence is a low, painted concrete block that is definitely more to indicate boundary and less for keeping interlopers ("antelopers"?) out. For some reason, of the three bushes that are the same type of plant, the deer only choose to gnaw on the leaves of one particular bush. Maybe because it is the bush farthest from the house. However, all the bushes are right next to each other. What is it about that one bush? For whatever the reason, we can't keep those ruminants from decimating that poor plant. I did wrap it in green chicken wire for a year or so. And, thankfully, the leaves filled in. But as SOON as I removed the fencing: smorgasbord!

We often find ourselves chasing the bloody creatures out of our yard. Well, looking at the situation from a positive side, at least we are getting our exercise.

However, our poor bushes aren't the only thing we have seen the deer eat. There is a particularly "mean" cactus native to this area called the cholla ("choy-ah").

Although it has very tender flesh, the plant encases itself in two inch long spines. No, not spines, needles; very sharp and very painful needles. Danny recently saw a deer chewing off a cholla's needles to get at the juicy flesh. How the deer managed to put its muzzle into that cactus in the first place was completely confounding. But when it managed to chew on those "lethal" needles, knock the arm off of the main plant and get to its succulent reward, it seemed as though the deer had some kind of unnatural resilience against this "worst-of-the-cacti" we've encountered.

But there also is a bird we've seen that seems to have the same resistance to that particular plant. There is a type of cholla called the "teddy bear". Not because it is cute and cuddly, but because the needles are so dense on its body, they resemble the fur on a teddy bear. Over the past couple of years, there has been a bird that has made its nest in a teddy bear cholla in our front yard. Not only has it raised a couple of broods among those needles, it regularly perches on them as if it was soft as cotton. How does it do that without impaling itself? How???

Birds are amazing to watch.

Returning to our back forty, there is the red-tailed hawk that likes to take advantage of the quails and doves chowing down at our bird feeders. I call it "the birdie buffet". No, we didn't set the feeders up for that intention. It simply seems that nature has a way of making do with what is available; even if what IS available is a bevy of birds. As much as we love watching our passive avian friends, who are we to deny the hawk its daily repast?

There have been some days when the hawk makes "casual" passes along the line of the "wash" as if to say "Don't worry about me. I couldn't care less. I'm not hungry". Then pounces out of nowhere. But, I think most of the prey birdies got wise to that trick and zoom away at the first sight of the hawk's ruse.

Most often the hawk will hover far from our yard, high above the ground so that it can be barely seen. It is obviously keeping an eye on the accumulation of fowl under and around our bird feeders. Then, just as you think it isn't interested about what is going on in our yard, it swoops in incredibly fast. You know the "swoop" is in progress when suddenly there is a huge flapping of wings as the feeding birdies scatter.

I have always wondered how those quails and doves knew the hawk was coming. Most of the birdies have their faces planted firmly in the seed that had been strewn onto the ground. After watching the activity for a while, I figured out there is always one quail not feeding and acting as a sentry. It usually perches itself on our non-security fence and watches. As soon as it perceives anything out of the ordinary, it makes a specific vocalization and the rest of the flock fly away. I don't know if the doves speak quail or just go along with the group. Either way, the system seems to work.

It is interesting, though, to watch when the hawk actually chases a bird into one of those “uneaten” bushes I was talking about. An entire chase scene happens without us being able to see it. There’s a lot of sound and fury, but, aside from some rustling branches, you can’t see what it going on. It’s like experiencing a drama over the radio instead of on television. In the end, sometimes the hawk emerges empty-taloned. But, on other occasions, victory is in its claws and another bird bites the dust.

And that’s nature, folks.

My new, favorite caper to watch is the tree-climbing bunny.

We get bunnies in our yard every day. They like to feast on the leaves that have fallen onto the ground from our lemon and orange trees. However they also enjoy the hard berries produced by our fruiting Mediterranean palm trees. Mediterranean palm tree trunks grow on an angle from a central base. By far, they aren’t as tall as a coconut palm. In addition, they are unlike a coconut palm that has one trunk that grows straight up from its roots. Many of the Mediterranean trunks grow at quite a severe angle to the ground and are not insurmountable. Unfortunately, the berries are found high among the palm fronds, growing next to the trunks of the trees. The bunnies can only take advantage of their desired delicacies when the berries grow ripe enough to fall to the earth. Sometimes I will pick the berries and scatter them beneath the trees. But that doesn’t always happen.

However, recently, I looked out the window of my bedroom to see a bunny IN THE TREE! It was munching on the berries. Well, apparently one very clever bunny realized, if it could keep itself on one of the angled trunks, it could bunny hop itself up to the berries. And that is EXACTLY what this one rabbit is doing. That clever bunny tickles me every time I see it climb.

The funny thing is, over the past years we’ve been here, we’ve seen coyotes doing the same thing! All I can figure is the bunny most have been spying on the canines. I’m thinking it is not unlike a foreign country stealing industrial secrets from another. I fantasize this is the Mother Nature version of covert espionage.

So anyway, keep an eye out for what is happening in nature around you. Animals are a WHOLE lot smarter than you think they are. And, as a result, certainly more entertaining.

And the great thing about the enjoyment you will get ... it is naturally free of charge.

Covertly observing,
An unexpected animal lover

Tick ... tick ... tick ...

Recently, I have been acutely aware of my own response to the flow of time. No new news there, right? I know EVERYBODY talks about how fast or slow they feel things progress under various situations. That conversation is as common as talking about the weather or cursing politicians.

However, I have always seemed to be inured to the passage of time. Whenever any chat turned to a lament about time passing too “this or that”, I always just smiled, nodded and heartily agreed. But, honestly, I was always just being polite. I guess it was because I wanted to make people feel good by validating their observation. When, in reality, I was thinking, “I don’t get ya!”

It’s not that I was being internally ornery or defiant in order to make myself feel superior. No, that wasn’t it at all. To me, the passage of time simply ... WAS! It ticked by as it always had for millennia... or, at least, for my short years here on God’s good Earth.

BUT ...

I suddenly have found myself contemplating sentiments I’ve heard all my life, such as “where did the time go?” I can only speculate my change in awareness is because of the isolation I have endured this past year due to the COVID-19 crisis. This unforeseen enlightenment feels like I have been underwater my whole life and have abruptly broken the water’s surface to suck in my first gasp of air; an air of awareness. All at once, I am sensing the proverbial passage of time.

The realization first swept through my pea-brain after my darling Danny and I received our second vaccine. We began to actually plan social events that we hadn’t even considered for over a year. This was specific to having dinner with our friend, Fran. Before “The Plague” hit, Danny, Fran and I often went out to dinner together. It was less because of the enjoyment of the food (although that certainly did factor into the fun), but we got together more for the pleasure of each others’ company and especially the conversation. Sure, we communicated at a distance throughout the year, but, before COVID-19 we got true satisfaction from our face-to-face interaction.

That all was stopped in its tracks by COVID-19. However, NOW, here we were planning to, once again, get together with Fran.

It was then the realization of “Oh my gosh! A year has passed by!” swept through me. I know it sounds crazy, but I really never felt the enormity of time passing until that moment. It practically buckled my knees! It was almost as though a secret chamber in my cranium was found, unlocked and opened to reveal an entirely new way of perceiving. I began looking back on past events that had come and gone that I had barely temporally measured in my mind:

- we moved to Tucson 4 years ago
- my mother passed away 13 years ago
- the World Trade Center disaster was 20 years ago
- the Y2K non-event was 21 years ago
- my first episode with cancer was 23 years ago
- Danny and I have been together 31 years
- I moved to Washington, DC 33 years ago
- my beloved Grammie passed 37 years ago
- I moved to New York City 45 years ago
- I graduated from high school 49 years ago

And on and on.

I suppose these kind of reflections are “normal” to most people. However, I have always lived in the present; what was done was done, what had passed had passed. But not now.

Maybe it isn't only because of the worldwide health emergency that has caused me to “open my eyes”. Perhaps it is a part of the aging process ... which, admittedly, is new territory for me ... that has caused this novel way of looking at life. Whatever the reason may be, I find myself being grateful for this new aspect of perception. I believe it will make me a better person, as long as I maintain a positive attitude about it all. It would be easy to get bogged down in the lament of “Look how much of my life is gone!” But that's not the kind of person I am. I am looking at this new approach with the mindset of “Look how much I have experienced! I am so lucky to be able to learn from these events.”

I would rather enjoy the passing time being positive. I won't worry about the “what ifs” of the past. Call me a Pollyanna, if you will. Just don't call me late for dinner.

Love in the time of COVID-19,
Stevie

Watch out!

I recently heard a curious and sad fact regarding a statistic from this past year of COVID-19. In spite of there being less vehicles on the road in the United States, more deaths occurred from traffic accidents. The powers-that-be blame the increase on risky driving behavior developing from this lack of vehicle proliferation on our highways.

This got me to thinking what exactly IS “risky” behavior on the road?

When reckless behavior is brought to mind, the obvious culprits are excessive speeding and foolhardy decisions. Driving “fast and loose” has all the cache of proving one’s dynamism, but is actually is more in the realm of self-destruction.

A less obvious dicey behavior is the distracted operation of one’s vehicle; as from texting, talking on the phone or making out with one’s significant other snuggling up from the passenger seat.

The irony of this overall acceptance that “reckless” means “undisciplined” doesn’t cover behavior that can be equally dangerous and disastrous.

I speak of excessively slow drivers.

I bring this up because of what occurred to me just the other day.

Very near my home, there is a major, north/south, 6-lane artery that leads to and from the city of Tucson. I was out ‘n’ about driving to get some “WiteOut” and Crazy Glue” I needed to tweak some new music I would be singing for our church Zoom service. Anyway, I was driving along with the pace of traffic, traveling about 55 miles an hour, when there was a very sudden bank of red brake lights in front of me. This caused me and everyone around me to do a bit of slamming on our own brakes to avoid hitting the persons in front of us.

It occurred to me this sudden need to brake isn’t such a good thing in an area that is filled with retirees and “people of a certain age”. As an older personality myself, I know my reaction time isn’t as good as it used to be.

Anyway, I immediately thought there must be an accident up ahead. I saw traffic moving faster in the lane next to me, so I cautiously pulled into the speedier lane and inched along a little faster. Well, creeping a bit farther down the road, I passed, not an accident, but a person driving about 35 miles an hour in the stretch of road designated for a 50 mile an hour speed limit.

O!M!G!

Was it a matter that the driver felt they were being sensible by driving at such a “safe” speed. Or had the year of living through COVID-19 made the driver live more carefully? Whatever the reason, they were certainly going to cause injury or death to either themselves or to some unsuspecting stranger.

It was clear that the inordinate caution being displayed was not a good solution to the greater scenario. It struck me that if the driver was more aware of their surroundings and realized the disturbance that was being created, perhaps they would have “upped the game” and actually drove the speed limit. But, then again, perhaps this person didn’t care. They were driving in their comfort zone and that was that.

However, that WASN’T that! This driving behavior genuinely struck fear in my heart. It was stupid and reckless; not to mention STEALTHY! I didn’t know the danger until it was on top of me. At least I can hear a speeding car coming at me. By creating this situation, the driver was causing another kind of distraction that is just as dangerous as texting. In this age of folks wanting instant information, their attention can get diverted from their driving by simply trying to figure out what is going on. It is a recipe for disaster.

I’ve experienced riding in a car with a person who customarily drove as the aforementioned individual did. It scared me to DEATH! Even on city streets, we went at a 15 mile an hour pace! I always felt if the impending accident didn’t kill us, the gun shot from the road-raged driver behind us would do us in!

What I’m saying here is, in this day and age, don’t forget to be hyper aware of what is happening in your surroundings. Yes, you have been locked up for a year and are used to doing things your way without having to consider the “other guy”. BUT ... now that you are venturing back out in the “real world”, remember to apply the survival techniques you haven’t needed to palpate in your extended time of isolation.

It will not only help with your continuity, it will also aid in the well-being of others.

Amen.

Looking out for the other person,
Speedy Gonzalez

No sweets for me

Okay ... I'd like to start this out by saying, I don't mean to complain. There is SO much tragedy and heartbreak going on these days, my very petty grievance doesn't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world.

The crux of my bellyache is ... well ... I simply am sorta hoping for a little something sweet without any dire follow-up ramifications. I know it doesn't sound like much, however, in my life, it has turned into a big deal.

In the past, I've groaned about my dietary restrictions. To reiterate, I'm diabetic, so no sugar. I'm extremely sensitive to gluten. And, due to a proliferation of kidney stones I need to avoid foods that are high in a chemical called oxalate that generates kidney "pearls".

Now, since the foods contributing most to kidney stone production tend to be leafy greens, I have no concern about them not being able to satisfy my sweet tooth. However, when it comes to food stuffs containing gluten, carbohydrates or sugar, I am hobbled ... HOBbled, I tell you!

Yes, yes, I have figured out how to create pretty snappy non-gluten, no sugar apple and pumpkin pies. And, I must admit, they are mighty tasty. But I sure as h-double-hockey-sticks am not going to bake a pie every couple of days just for the yen of a little sweet sumpthin' in my life. I am WAY too indolent to keep up THAT sort of activity. I am searching for a little over-the-counter satisfaction that won't cause me any intestinal distress.

Now, I realize there are plenty of products out there touting "No Sugar Added" on their labels. Those items are being manufactured as snake oil trying to be passed off as sugar free to the unsuspecting consumer! When you actually read the ingredient list, they may have just 4 or 5 grams of sugar, but they tend to have three times that in sugar alcohol. Plus, the carbohydrate level is off the charts. Hm! I wonder if one's metabolism knows the difference when it is breaking them down in the body?

"Oh, those sugar alcohols and carbohydrates don't count as REAL sugar. I'll just ignore them".

Fat chance!

When I do take the leap and consume a "No Sugar Added" comestible, I always wake up the next morning with a stupidly high blood sugar level. Dang their huckster hides!

Don't get me wrong. I am able to control my sugar. I eat what I am supposed to. I faithfully take my diabetes medication and I try, as often as I might, to exercise. But,

“jeez Jack!” Can’t a guy get a little treat now and then without fear of putting him in the hospital???

Now, I hear you kind-hearted folks out there saying, “But they make sugar free products. AND there are gluten free products!” I know, I know. But have you ever seen a sugar free AND a gluten free goody all boxed up in one convenient package? Yes, there is one satisfying tidbit we have found in the form of a macaroon cookie that comes in a can. But that’s it! Otherwise, next time you are wandering the aisles of your favorite Piggly Wiggly, take a goood look around you. No bub. No such thing.

So, let’s just focus on acquiring a little bit of chocolate, shall we? My, my! There are quite a number of chocolate products that are sugar free. As a matter of fact, Russell Stover has a HUGE line of a variety of yummy chocolate treats. The caveat is they are all sweetened with Stevia.

Ahhhh, Stevia. A gentle name, so close to my own ... with a sweetness like sugar ... and a promotion machine behind it to match. Stevia, Stevia, Stevia. A rose by any other name ...

Unfortunately, for me, that promise of true gratification belies a hidden backfire ... literally. Stevia causes me to react like the Hindenburg on it’s final day over Lakehurst, New Jersey. To be blunt, I react to it with so much explosive gas, God forbid I get near a flame. There would be a conflagration. So much uncontrollable windiness occurs, I could recite the alphabet with my backside. I have to hold onto something just so I won’t get jettied away. Talk about chapped lips!

Anyway, I think you get the idea.

My darling Danny recently had a wonderful idea of having a gathering centering around roasting wienies and making S’mores. The hot dog part is fine for me, as long as it is all beef with no mystery fillers. And there are plenty of gluten free buns now on the market. But the S’mores involve BOTH traditionally made products created with sugar (marshmallows and chocolate) and gluten (Graham crackers). Oh, what to do, what to do?

The internet has served (saved) us on many an occasion. Danny did a search and actually found no sugar marshmallows! They are made in Belgium. They arrived the other day in two little, tasteful packages. I didn’t try one yet due to the fact that I wanted to save them for me and any other roaster with a concern for their sugar intake. I admit, unlike a “normal” marshmallow, they look a bit squarish. I hope the taste doesn’t match the untraditional shape.

Many years ago, I did find gluten free Graham crackers. But, for the life of me, they haven’t ever again appeared on my pantry shelf. I think an internet search is due for them as well.

I know I will need to put up with the sugar content of any gluten free item I find. I figure that will be okay as long as the sugar free gods smile upon me in my search for an appropriate chocolate bar. I am hoping the folks at Hershey's will come through for me.

In the meantime, I am happy and open to take any suggestions from you all. I am sure some of you have encountered the same snags du cuisine as I. You must have an amazing collective knowledge with regard to my plight.

And I assure you, if you refrain from suggesting anything with Stevia, I promise no more flatulence jokes.

Looking for Mr. Goodbar,
Sweet Stevie-ah

Subway stories

As I have written in the past, I lived in New York City from 1977 to 1988.

People who lived there, especially those who made their homes in Manhattan, like me, had a tendency to walk between engagements whenever they could. Personally, I found it easy to stroll 60 blocks or so with no adverse effects. Of course, as one travelled north/south, the blocks were relatively short. As a result, it only barely took an hour to walk that distance.

When and if the weather turned bad, I very rarely took a bus. Although there were plenty of bus routes around for someone to take advantage of, the New York City traffic always made the trip tedious and, sometimes, almost unbearable. Many friends would take advantage of the milieu of taxi cabs zooming around, but my little cheap self would never dream of hailing one. That is, unless there were four or five other friends with me to share the car fare. If I wasn't walking to my next destination, I was riding on the time-honored New York City subway.

Now, during those years of my residency, the subway was less "time-honored" and more "notorious". More often than not, the stations and the train cars were not only dirty, they were covered in graffiti. Although, in the 1980's, I remember seeing a lot of the work of graffiti artist, Keith Haring on the walls of the underground stations. I wasn't sure what I was looking at or the message the artist was trying to convey. However, in spite of my knowing it was vandalism, it certainly was intriguing. Of course, Mr. Haring managed to insinuate his art into the psyche of pop culture and won the hearts of the darlings of art criticism. He provided endless commentary from the glitterati until his untimely death at the age of 31.

Being that the subway was the transportation of my choice (other than my feet), I encountered many a situation that remain memorable to me. Here are just a few of those experiences.

One time, I was riding home at night on a train that serviced Harlem, which was much farther north from where I lived. As a result, many times, I had seen some very "dicey", if not sinister characters riding that train. This particular evening, I was already in a car when an obvious "gang of thugs" got on. No words were spoken to me, however, it was evident they were there to make trouble. They spread out over the car and made their presence known to other riders either verbally or physically. I remember one "member" stood directly in front of me, leaned on a support pole and whipped out a switch blade. He slowly opened it and stared, menacingly at me while "cleaning" his fingernails. I would not look directly at him, but I knew he was trying to frighten me; showing his "power" over me. I decided I wouldn't play his game. I simply remained

composed and looked straight ahead, just beyond him. When my station arrived, I waited until the very last second before the doors closed, then, just as the doors were shutting, ran out of the car. I turned around and stood to see the shocked look on the face of the kid with the knife. I then waited for the train to move. I trotted along the window until just before the train entered the tunnel. Then I gave him a two-handed middle finger salute. He and his cohorts went berserk! But there was nothing they could do. The train was already moving out of the station. Afterward, I ran home like a maniac.

I know what I did was stupid. Chalk it up to the folly of youth. However, I got my just reward that night and received some satisfaction that I had not relinquished power over my existence.

However, to tell the truth, I simply didn't ride that train for weeks afterward. And, when I did, I never rode it at the same time of evening. I wasn't a COMPLETE moron!

On another occasion, I have a distinct picture in my mind of being harassed by a grimy, homeless guy while riding along in a subway car. Without being aware of my environs, I had parked my butt on a seat directly across from this vagrant. Without provocation, he began to call out to me: "Hey! Gayblade! Gayblade!" That was how he said it, "gayblade" as one word instead of two. Now, even then, "gay blade" was a very old fashioned, derogatory term for someone of my homosexual persuasion. I was surprised he was using the phrase. As he persisted, I tried to ignore his crazy self. The riders around me seemed to be getting tense by his assault, but I refused to be daunted by his invectives. However, after a while, due to the absurdity that he was using such a phrase and the ridiculousness this was even happening, I began to laugh out loud. Fortunately, my laughter broke the tension of the people around me and they began to laugh as well. Finally the harasser himself broke a smile and joined in the laughing. All at once, the laughter diffused an uncomfortable and potentially precarious situation. We all laughed in the face of unpleasantness and the darkness evaporated.

As the saying goes, "Laughter is the best medicine."

Then there was a time when an homeless guy and I came together for a matter of good.

I was standing near the far end of a platform under one of the larger train stations. I was periodically looking to my left into the empty tunnel to see if I could see the headlights of the next train. Finally, after a few minutes wait, the headlights came into view. I stepped back a bit in anticipation of giving some space between myself and the train. Just as I did, I heard a commotion to my left. On the far other end of the platform, I saw that a man had fallen and was now laying motionless on his back, with

his upper torso hanging out over the tracks in front of the oncoming train! Nobody moved! No one around him was doing ANYTHING! I began running ... slowly at first, almost as though I was moving in slow motion found in a dream. However, I picked up my pace and quickly found myself next to him. Just as I arrived, an older homeless guy appeared, looking ragged and toothless, but enormously alarmed. The man hanging over the tracks was hefty; I quickly surmised he was of a weight far beyond what either I or the homeless guy could manage to move as individuals. Immediately, the homeless guy looked at me and yelled, "You grab one leg and I'll grab the other and PULL!" And we DID ... just in time for the blaring train to rush safely by us.

The transit police came almost immediately afterward. I figured someone on the platform had notified them. I wish I could tell you what the situation was that caused the man to collapse in the first place. The police and paramedics took over and I was, once again, just a spectator. At that point, I felt helpless. All I could do was look at the homeless fellow ... he nodded to me ... and we went our separate ways.

My part in the drama was over.

I often wonder why we are presented with situations when we are. I have mused that our lives are like taking a train; sometimes we are waiting on a platform for something to happen or sometimes we are riding along watching the scenery go by. It is up to us to make the choice to get on the train in order to see what is up ahead or to get off and make a difference at our destination.

Beyond the guidance of the train's engineer and conductor, the rest is up to us.

Ridin' the rails,
A fellow traveler

The Numbers Game

I recently jokingly referred to my neighbor, Stan, as “old”. (“Hi, Stan!”) Anyone who knows Stanley would know how obviously absurd that comment is. Even though he’s only a few years older than me, he is a vibrant kind of guy. He is more active than I am; walking and playing pickle ball (a mini-version of tennis) every day! He has even researched, compiled and published several books about his family tree. Our Stan is a “wild and crazy” and very funny fella! Yes, he is a guy in his retirement years, but his vibrant and inquisitive personality belies his “youth”. Just a few years younger, his wonderful wife, Linda (“Hi, Linda!”), who is about my age, is equally as physically active and has filled her life with ALL kinds interests. The proverbial “moss” doesn’t grow on either of these people.

So I got to thinking, in light of my little “joke” at Stan’s expense, at what point do we actually consider someone “old”? Is it ones’ chronological years? Is it ill health? A curmudgeonly attitude? Or does living an unmotivated life make one “old”?

There are young’uns who have been frail from the get go. In spite of their illness, you wouldn’t actually consider calling them old before they even neared their sixties. A physical failing is not cause for one to be labeled as “old”.

Then there are folks hovering around 100 years of age who go square dancing or sky diving. They are chronologically “on in years”, but are they “old”?

My darling Danny’s mother, Oma, a person well into the “autumn of her life” (sorry Oma ... at least I didn’t give your age), just drove 18 hours straight, BY HERSELF, from Florida to central Illinois with only breaks for gas, snacks and to relieve herself! I couldn’t do that and I am “only” in my sixties!

Danny also had an aunt who lived in her own house, took care of herself and died in her chair a week before her 109th birthday!

On the opposite end of the spectrum, there is my own long suffering mother whom I always referred to as “old before her time”. Not to her face, of course. If I did, I would not have survived the verbal lambasting from her. I, most likely, would be found quivering and catatonic in a corner somewhere after her onslaught.

Anyway, after she had her first heart attack while she was in her mid-forties, she retired from work, went to bed to convalesce and, for years, never seemed to arise from her self-confinement. Yes, her heart attack frightened the bejesus out of her. However, even though she was in her forties, she always acted like an “old lady”. However, after about thirty years, a funny thing happened to my mother. When she got really sick and had to be moved to a nursing home, she blossomed into a new person. She regularly showed others how to crochet, taught a Bible class and even became secretary of the

residents' association. She "adopted" another patient ... a woman close to 100 ... and took her "under her wing". My "old" and infirmed mother suddenly became an enthusiastic volunteer nurse's aid! Even though my mother was physically more frail than she ever had been in her life, her change of attitude made all the difference in her quality of living. She no longer seemed "old" to any of us who knew her.

So what do people mean when we refer to someone as "old"?

Obviously, aches and pains can slow us down. Infirmities will even sometimes sideline us for a while. But that doesn't mean we have to stop in our tracks.

Danny's and my friend, Fran, also a woman of a certain age, has a bum knee and has difficulty getting around. However, over the course of the year, has knitted over 30 afghans to give away to folks in order to give them a little cheer. Her kindness has been motivation for living a forward moving life!

With aging, it's also natural for the brain to lose its sharpness ... as we grasp for the name of our kindergarten teacher or even the first name of the new neighbor we just met. It happens to everyone, but does that make us out to be "old"?

I believe "old" means giving up: when we decide that there is nothing worth getting out of our chair for; when we decide the world around us becomes too unpleasant to face; when the need to say a kind word to someone else gets lost; when our will to move ahead simply stops.

Even if we may be sick or ailing, poor or underprivileged or, yes, even "on in years", it is a matter of attitude that keeps us "youthful". Our circumstances may tell us we are past our prime, but as long as our hearts tell us there is more we can do, we will respond with some sort of positive action. In my "book", staying positive IS the answer. An affirmative demeanor will create purpose. Doing what you can, even within your physical boundaries, will help stave off the ravages of apathy. Even if you have trouble getting out of your chair, knit 30 afghans! What do you have to lose?

It may also help deter people from thinking you're "old".

It's only a number,
Methuselah

Matters of affection

Recently, during a conversation about our families, a friend of mine asked me if I liked my mother. She didn't say "love". She said "liked". I was completely thrown off kilter.

Did I like my mother?

I should have immediately given my friend the logical, knee jerk answer of "Of course I did! She was my mother!" But I didn't. I hesitated. And I was stunned by my own indecision as to how to reply.

After I got my self together and, once again, found words in my mouth, I thankfully replied, "Yes ... yes, I did." But my own honesty caused me to qualify my answer by adding, "But she drove me crazy".

And then I felt guilty.

Why was it that I felt badly about a truth I revealed ... not just to my friend, but to myself? Was it because I knew I should have been unequivocally positive in my response?

My mother DID drive me nuts in her later years. I found her endless monologues and short temper trying on my nerves. However, knowing her life story as I did, I should have been more forgiving of both her ... and myself. I also knew those quirks didn't completely define her as a person.

Did I like my mother?

In the past, I've written about my long suffering mother. How she was a product of her time and upbringing. Her intelligence and rebellion was quashed under a domineering father and a society that had no time for her independent nature.

As a mother, she did what she could with the "tools" that she had left in her emotional arsenal. In my childhood, she was extra kind to me; even giving me a little bonus of affection she seem to reserve only for me. As a teenager, I became her "best friend" and sounding board. We went to dinner and shows together without including the rest of the family. Once, just the two of us even took a trip to Montreal. As I grew a bit older, she granted me favors that no one else received. Favors such as loaning me our second car for a week to travel around to see college friends in their home towns.

But, then, as an adult, I permanently moved away from home. Now that I was no longer living with her, her not-so-subtle need for my attention became an outright onslaught of irritating behavior. Later, by the time we were both on equal footing as adults, I seemed to tolerate her presence rather than enjoy it.

In those later years, I was loyal to her. I remained her sounding board and tried to give her the emotional support she needed; even if that support drained me of my own

emotional stability. On her birthday, I sent her yellow roses, her favorite. And I tried to visit her every Christmas. I felt I gave her the requisite respect by “honoring thy mother”. However, when she passed, my sadness was mixed with relief. “Relief” because I was no longer obligated to sustain her; an energy that caused me to erect an emotional wall between us. To this day, I feel guilty I needed to take that stance in order to protect myself.

Now, looking back on our history, I sincerely need to ask myself, “Did I like my mother?”

I liked how she supported me all my life. I liked her intelligence. I liked how she made the best of a situation no matter how bad it was. I liked how she shared her love of music and artistic endeavors with me. I liked her stuffed pork chops. I liked her appreciation for the finer things in life, even though she could never have them for herself. I liked how she read a book a day. I liked how she could do the Sunday New York Times crossword puzzle in ink in less than fifteen minutes. I liked that she tried her best to make things work, even though events around her were falling apart. But most of all, I liked that she liked me.

Circumstances put us together as a family. But her best attributes are what I look for in a friend.

Yes, I liked my mother. And my heart breaks that I never told her so.

“Love” is assumed, “like” is a choice.

But she did drive me crazy.

I like you ma,
Sunshine

Southwest Home Gardening

Since the time my darling Danny and I moved to Tucson, I have been dabbling in some gardening.

As all you non-Southwesterners can imagine, gardening in the desert has its own peculiarities. Not that it is a bad thing. It just is an everyday education for someone like me who did not grow up here. It certainly has its appeal. The difference with what I am used to is not unlike trying horticulture on Mars; fascinating, if not sometimes frustrating.

The first rule I've learned is: do NOT overwater your cacti! (!!!! - Here's a few more explanation marks to emphasize that point). I have found that plants in the cacti family will rot away with too much water. I mean ROT! With too much moisture, they will begin to look like something out of a zombie movie. The cacti turn odd colors like a sickly orange and then black. The black stuff smells putrid ... definitely horror movie material.

Cacti will do the same thing if they get overly cold in the winter. Unlike watering, there isn't a whole lot you can do for protecting the plants from the cold. That is, other than putting jolly little Santa hats on them. Or swathing them outright in plastic or rags, making them appear more like something you would find in an Egyptian museum rather than desert flora. Even so, the rot can still creep in.

The good thing about a cactus is if only the upper limbs succumb to the ravages of cold, you can just lop off the offending arm and eventually it will grow back a new one; spiky as ever!

Speaking of spikes ... there is a cactus down here (that I have written about before) called a cholla. It is covered in spines. If even one sticks you it HURTS! The feeling is worse than simply getting stuck by a pin. I swear they have chemicals in their prickles that purposely are there to cause you agony. Oy! Of course, we have fourteen in our yard. Some are still just little guys, but, like a baby rattlesnake, are just as potent as an adult. I must say, though, they are very attractive.

Then there is the ocotillo. Even though ocotillos have spines (EVERYTHING down here has spines), they aren't traumatically painful as a cholla. However, ocotillos have this peculiar tendency to look dead most of the time. They are the undead of the desert world: rising from the grave just when you think they have gone on to their great reward in arid Heaven. In fact, in the past, we thought the one in our backyard was long gone. But one day, we were amazed to see it sprout leaves after a brief rain.

Ocotillos look like long sticks just stuck in the ground. Literally, just a bunch of sticks jutting into the sky. They can get quite tall; fifteen to twenty-five feet. When they

DO make their living state known, the sticks become covered with small leaves. And, in the spring, they get these orangish-red berry-blooms, but only on the tippy tips of selected sticks.

The ocotillo in our yard is quite large because of its age. It didn't grow up on our property, however. A couple of years ago, our landscaper was pulling it out of another customer's yard and asked us if we wanted it (for a discounted price, of course). We agreed. He and his crew put it in the ground and there it sat for months, looking deader than a doornail ("doorknob", "doughnut", "sack of rocks" ... choose your idiom). So, out of desperation, we decided to add it to our drip irrigation system.

OH! For those of you who don't know, EVERYBODY down here has an irrigation system that drips water onto their NON-NATIVE plants about once a day. Otherwise, that greenery would shrivel up and blow away in the Southwestern sun. Everything is on timers, so you don't need to worry about remembering to "turn on the hose" each day. That's good because most everyone down here is over 60 years old and can barely remember to eat lunch, much less turn on the drip system.

Anyway, we decided to add it to our drip system and it began to sprout leaves! But then, our neighbor, Stan ("Hi, Stan!") told us it would rot the roots. (Oh, that overwatering thing!) So we took it off the drip system and watched our little burgeoning leaves wither away.

But, as I said, even though, most of the time, it looks completely deceased, after each good rain, the little leaves come back.

It doesn't seem fair to us, however. That's because we can see ocotillos growing in the "wild" stretches around us and they are in full leaf with those odd little berry/flowers almost all year round. Danny decided we must have a different "breed" of ocotillo. Or maybe even a different sex. The others must be the male peacocks of their species and we have the ocotillo version of a peahen.

Oh well. It gives us something to talk about.

And speaking of talking about something, I have to talk about those damn agave grubs! They are little black beetles that lay their eggs on the roots of any agave plant. When the larvae hatch and turn into fat, maggot-like grubs, they eat the roots right out from the plant they are living on. We have lost so many plants to these varmints! We even had this HUGE agave that stood five feet tall that began to look sickly. When it started to lean to one side, we knew something was up. The day I went to look closer at it, it simply fell over when I touched it; the roots were completely gone. Now, before I plant ANYTHING in the soil, whether it is an agave or not, I treat the dirt with a specially formulated insecticide that gets rid of the little critters.

Oh! I also have to mention the ground! The soil here (if you can call it that) can get solid as concrete. We even bought a specialized drill bit to drive into the ground in order to break it up enough to plant something. Otherwise, you need to use a pickaxe. Our next door neighbors, Stan and Linda (“Hi, again!”) are having a casita built in their backyard. (A casita is a separate building, usually made up of one or two rooms, folks use as a studio or guest accommodations). When the builders were preparing the area in order to lay the cement slab, we became aware of them jack hammering. We knew there was an open hearth made of concrete that was needing to be removed by jack hammer. After a few days, we became curious because they were still jack hammering. The sound wasn’t annoying, just ongoing. I looked over the fence to see what was taking them so long. It turned out, after they finished with the hearth, in order to get the site ready for the pouring of the cement, they had to jack hammer the GROUND!!!

In spite of the extra exertion one needs to go through in order to help make things flourish, I have loved the learning curve I’ve been on and the ultimate rewards that we reap. For example, cacti blossom with the most awe inspiring and beautiful flowers!

Proof of that is our gaw-geous raised cactus garden that runs along the entire length of the side of our house. When we moved in, there was nothing in that expanse. So we had our landscaper guy put in the raised garden. It stands about two feet high, six feet wide and well over thirty feet long. He created a stacked stone facade using no cement that looks very handsome. He bordered the wall with a winding paved walkway. Then he filled the garden with an astounding variety of native and non-native plants. Over the years, we have lost some sprouts to those blankety-blank agave beetles, but we always seemed to be able to replace them with even more interesting varieties. Every day, we go out to gaze on it and are always amazed at the beauty it offers.

Our garden is just a sampling of the lush and unique beauty offered here in the Sonoran Desert. Daily, our little garden reminds us how lucky we are to be able to experience this special landscape for ourselves.

In appreciation of creation,
Brother Nature

Running hot and cold

Oh, I know in the past I have offered you my opinion on hot versus cold weather. But today, I seem to be stuck as to what to write about. Thus, I have decided to fall back on the old adage, "When you don't have anything to speak about, talk about the weather". After all, other than death and taxes, it's about the only thing we all have in common.

What brings the weather to mind (AGAIN) is how preternaturally beautiful this spring has been. While so many of you in the non-Southwestern climes suffered through a really harsh winter and a mercurial spring, we, down this way, have been experiencing glorious weather. The winter was very mild, with hardly even a dusting of snow. And the spring has had us in the 80's for weeks.

Yes, we are in a historical drought. But, as I've been saying all along, the good thing about a drought is you always have good weather.

Every morning, I look out my window to observe what is happening outside. And every morning, I see a cloudless firmament. Granted, a couple of weeks ago, we were shocked to get rain two days in a row. My little rain gauge had us getting 1/4 inch.

ALL us retirees have a rain gauge. Not so much from a desire to be scientific, but more for giving us something to talk about. "You got a 1/4 inch??? Well I got 3/8ths!!"

Ah, oldsters ...

Anyway, now that we are into May and the cactus blooms are blasting and the baby quail are zooming their little golf-ball sized bodies around our yard, the temperature has begun to creep into the nineties.

I know if I say, "But it's a dry heat", you will all breath an exasperated sigh and never read my blog-things again. So let me just say that my darling Danny and I have not yet turned on our air conditioning against the heat of the day. We throw all our windows and doors open and let the DRY breeze waft through our home. We are able to do this because we have French doors that lead onto a screened in back veranda. With those doors wide open, it is like bringing the outdoors in. Of course, it is minus the sun's beating rays. We get the cooler breezes offered by a desert zephyr.

Lovely.

And when it will get REALLY hot in a couple of months, both Danny and I have no trouble with the solar powered temperature. We turn the A/C on and do stuff outdoors in the morning or the evening.

Well, to be clear ... DANNY does stuff in the morning. I usually am in bed until around nine. By the time I do my morning ablutions, eat my breakfast, read the paper and do the crossword puzzles (we have two), it's time for lunch.

But, as I was saying, the heat is really tolerable ... to us. I would much rather be staying indoors avoiding the extreme heat for three months (or so) than staying inside avoiding the freezing cold for SIX months. But ya make your own choices. Mine is on the side of the restorative warmth.

Look, I grew up in the cold winters of upstate New York. And, yes, there was a time I could stay out for hours and not ever being aware of my fingers and toes turning black from frostbite. But, as I matured, I began to realize that I was COLD in the winter. By the time I was an older fella, my tolerance to any temperature under 60 degrees completely evaporated. A damp 55 outside had me quivering as though I had epilepsy. That cold thing wasn't for me.

So here I am, in the middle of the desert, where I belong. No more vibrating due to the arrival of Jack Frost. Here, I remain in a calm, happy and stable thermalized state.

Of course, I do seem to sweat an awful lot.

Chilling in the heat,
A desert flower

Mr. Fix It

I have always fancied myself as a handyman. After all, I come from a long line of tinkers. Some of my kin even turned this knack for repairing things into a full-time job. Both my mother's father and my younger brother, Mike, became carpenters. Also, over his lifetime, my poor father managed to create all sorts of gizmos and gee-gaws to function as time saving devices. I would say that both sides of my family have contributed to my over-confidence when it comes to fixin' things.

Now, not to be too sarcastic about my abilities, I do have a tiny modicum of smugness with regards to the fact that I have installed, not one, not two, but THREE garbage disposals in various sinks throughout my life. Not to mention the multitude of toilet tank mechanisms I have replaced. Yes, I believe I did inherit the moniker of "Mr. Fix It".

That is, until the project I turn my sights on goes horribly wrong.

For example ... there is this new car we just bought ...

(Uh, oh.)

My darling Danny and I have enjoyed Jeep ownership over the past 10 or so years. This past December, our Jeep Liberty began developing problems with leaking oil. It turned out we needed to have the oil pan gasket replaced. This job would cost us thousands of dollars. Being the car had almost 130,000 miles on it and had "run its race", we decided to go ahead to make the leap and buy a new car.

It didn't hurt that Jeep was having a crrrazy end of year sale. If one bought one of their vehicles in the last week of December, the buyer would receive the employees' discount. We ended up getting almost \$10,000 off a 2021 Jeep Grand Cherokee.

Snazzy!

Even though, for the first time, we had a back-up camera in the car, our habit of backing into our garage was a little trickier than it had been with the old car. The thing about the Grand Cherokee was that it was a little longer than the Liberty. Well one day, early on, poor Danny thought he had judged the parking spot pretty well. Unfortunately, the car wasn't quiite all the way into the garage when he activated the garage door. Much to his chagrin, the door came down on the front bumper.

Now, I have to throw in an aside here. When Danny and I bought our very first car back in the early 1990's when we lived in DC, we also had a garage. (Which, by the way, was a big deal in the city). Anyway, I loosely call it a garage. The structure was more like a parking shed. It was built in the 1920's and was the perfect size to fit a Model T Ford. However, by modern standards, it lacked ...well ... space. It was made from galvanized metal sheets, a wood frame and had a dirt floor. Because it was from another era, it had

two swinging barn doors that opened onto the alley behind our house. One day, almost a week after we had made the car purchase, I was backing the car into the garage when the wind picked up and blew one of those ancient doors into the driver's side mirror, smashing it to bits. At first, I was horrified. But Danny put it into perspective saying he was glad it happened. Otherwise, we would be worried for weeks about the first scratch. Also, because the car was "dinged", it would be a less inviting target for a car thief. Actually, that is the logic we also used for why we never washed our car. ANYWAY, it got me to thinking that it was our sacrifice to the "car gods" and they would have mercy on us for the rest of the time we owned that car. And they did seem to smile on us. That is, until we had to finally trade it in because the back doors needed to be bungeed together in order for them to stay closed.

So, back to the present ... I didn't feel badly because Danny's "ding" was our sacrifice to the car gods. Plus, the scrape actually was quite small; only about the size of a folded match stick. No big deal.

However, being that the car was SO new, we decided to take it back to the dealer to get an estimate for the repair of this teensy-weensy spot. My mouth dropped when the estimation came back in the amount of \$1,500!!!

"For that itty-bitty mark????"

Apparently, they would need to remove the bumper, which involved taking off the entire headlight array, sand it down, paint, blah, blah, blah.

I left the joint SURE I could repair it on my own for FAR less money.

I remembered one of my nephews (Chris) had worked in a body shop, so I wrote him for his advice. My dad had also worked in his uncle's body shop just after the war. He had a good suggestion to wet the sandpaper I would be using. Meanwhile Danny asked his brother-in-law, Dave, his opinion. My nephew, Chris, sent me a "step-by-step" while Dave also put in his two cents. Between the three, I was certain I could get the job done in no time.

I knew I could get the matching color paint from the car dealership by giving them my VIN number. I did just that. The paint came in a tube like toothpaste. I was concerned because it came out clumpy. However, I figured it must smooth out upon application. (So I thought).

The day of my attempt at auto repair came. I taped off everything on the car around the offending area, sanded the mark off with the appropriate fine grit sandpaper and water and sprayed the primer paint that was required. However, using the "toothpaste" paint, my fears came to fruition. It didn't smooth out on application. By the time I put the protective gloss on, it looked more like a boil than a scratch. Only now, it was about the size of a silver dollar instead of a match.

Something had to be done.

Using the internet as my guide, I found a company that sold kits for minor car repair. Like the car dealership, all I needed to do was give them the VIN number of the car and they would send me the matching paint. When the repair kit arrived, it had everything I needed, with very clear instructions included. Plus all the paint was in spray cans, so I knew I could achieve an even coating (or so I thought).

I think with this second attempt, my downfall was that I was over eager. I say this because, my bad judgment had me trying the deed on one of the windiest days of the year. Even though I had taped and covered the area around the now silver dollar sized spot, I neglected to cover the rest of the front of the car. As a result of my folly, after I had sanded everything and began spraying the paint, it misted over all the unprotected areas. Stupidly undaunted, I KEPT ON SPRAYING!! By the time I got to the final gloss layer, the wind was blowing so hard, I had to hold the spray paint can overly close. Thus, the gloss layer went on so thick and wet, it ran down the front of the car. So THEN I tried to smooth out the uneven parts by lightly sanding them out. By the time I was done, I now had THREE gloopy areas all about the size of an index card. ALSO you could still see the uneven spot of the original scratch. PLUS, now parts of the bumper were covered with unwanted paint. IN ADDITION, the gloss paint they sent was faulty and appeared to be filled with tiny crystals instead of being smooth and clear. To add insult to injury, the paint that was sent dried to a slightly different shade than the car's color!

AUURRGH!!!

When Danny looked at it, he said, "It doesn't matter. It's our car. All I really care about is that it won't rust."

But of course, the OCD in me was not placated. I was sort of ... BESIDE MYSELF! So, in order to alleviate my hyper-ventilating, he suggested I re-do it by painting black racing stripes on either side of the disaster area (my words, not his) and re-sand and paint the area between the lines. I agreed that would be the best solution. But that would mean a three foot by one foot expanse ... slightly larger than the match stick ding I started with (cough!).

BUT FIRST, I needed to remove the unwanted painted areas that weren't in line to be redone without damaging the car's original finish. I finally did that by using 99.6% isopropyl alcohol, hundreds of cotton balls and a WHOLE bunch of elbow grease. That task took two and a half days.

Then I purchased a quick setting epoxy filler for the scratched area.

I, subsequently, set about RE-taping and THOROUGHLY covering every part of the front of the car I wasn't going to be re-re-re-modifying. And instead of backing the car into the garage, I pulled it front first ... out of the weather (YOU BETCHA!)

Well, long story already too long, the deed was done. And now it doesn't look half bad. Oh, I did need to buy a can of gloss paint for metal from Ace Hardware in order to get the finish I wanted ... but, in the end, it all worked out.

I confess I had become a bit of a neighborhood spectacle. Every day I was out there with my car bumper and my butt facing the world, and every day two or three folks would come over to chat. My neighbor, Bob, was with me almost every day; he wasn't helping, just yakking. As a matter of fact, he's the one who suggested I write about the whole mess in my blog-thing. I told him I would give him credit.

So ... All-in-all, with all the "fits and starts", I suppose we spent about \$200.00 in total. However, if I was to include the cost of my labor, I would say the overall expense was ... priceless.

Would I do it again? Well, at this point, with the education I incurred, I could open up my own body (car) shop! Sure, I'd do it again! Once a handy man, always a handyman. After all, I have a reputation to live up to.

Workin' on it,
The Handy Dandy

Whinny!

My darling Danny and I like to watch television shows that are based on the work and lives of veterinarians. There are a multitude of programs to choose from: “Dr. Oakley of the Yukon”, “The Incredible Dr. Pol”, “Heartland Docs” and “Dr. K’s Exotic Animals”. There is even a new-ish vet show set in a town only a couple hours drive from Tucson called “Wild Life of Dr. Ole”.

I have learned SO much from these television shows and have really enjoyed the information they offer while getting to know the vets themselves. Danny, growing up on a farm in Illinois, naturally, has a special fondness for them.

However, because I come from a long line of hypochondriacs, Danny worries that every time a new animal illness is presented on screen, little Stevie will profess to exhibiting clinical signs of that disease. And it’s TRUE! I can’t tell you how many cases of mange or botfly I have had in the past few years ... all imagined, of course ... but real to me while they stayed on my television screen.

In addition, more often than not, at least one segment per episode will have some poor horse suffering from colic.

Colic is a disorder in which the digestive tract of the animal will seize up, causing painful gas in the stomach and/or intestines. Colic is no laughing matter. The constipation and bloating can kill a horse very quickly. If and until it can be treated by the vet guiding a hose up its nose down through the poor animal’s throat to clear the obstruction, the horse will, more often than not, writhe around on the ground in terrible pain.

Well, Danny’s fear of me getting whatever condition that appears on “our” vet shows has come true: I am currently suffering from colic.

Oh, I am calling it colic. After a very recent episode of major pain and distended abdomen, what else could it be labeled? I was ready to do some rolling around on the ground myself while Danny shoved a hose up my nose.

(TMI ALERT!!!)

Now, let me tell ya ...

I’m a reg’lar kind-a guy (if you get my drift). Every morning, like clockwork ... rain or shine ... I get up and immediately make my offering to the porcelain gods. But, of recent, not so much. It was surprising, but not worrisome.

That is until this week.

Uh! Mah! Girdle! I suddenly was HURTIN’! My po’ little intestines were on fire! This lack of movement and subsequent pain had never happened to me before!! Thank GOODNESS I had some over-the-counter meds in the house left over from when my

father was living with us. Anti-gas this and stool softener that, along with some good ol' Tylenol helped alleviate the agony. After some touch and not-so-go moments, I got to feeling ever so much better. And now, I am getting ready to enhance my treatment by running to the store to procure some fiber supplement.

This is where I, now, apologize to you, the reader, for relating these experiences to you so overtly. However, I want you to take my story as a word of warning for your own existence.

Here are some points to consider:

If you can avoid it, don't get old. It will make your standpoint on health SO much less complicated.

If you DO find yourself getting older than you EVER imagined you would, DO NOT assume your physical comportment will remain the same. Sidestep untoward health upheavals by thinking about what you can do to avert those speed bumps in advance. This can take the form of ... let's say ... adding some FIBER to your diet once you pass the age of fifty.

Another thing to consider is not to become gluten intolerant. This is because if you WANT to add some fiber to your diet, most products on our market shelves that are high in fiber are made of ... what? ... WHEAT!!! Wheat being the primary source of gluten.

Well, you get the gist my dilemma.

I will move forward with what I can do to assuage this "situation", with an eye on maybe seeing the doc. It is with hope, my dilemma won't come to that. But, I have found it is not always a good idea to self-diagnose nor self-medicate.

Anyway, I decided to look at all this drama as another chapter in my book of life. Hopefully, if I just stay positive and keep on "reading", the plot will have a happy ending. Perhaps the story will have the same jubilant outcome as "The Black Stallion", where the unlikely horse wins the race.

It sure beats rolling around on the ground with a hose stuck up my nose.

Recovering on the bright side,
Neigh, Neigh

Keepin' busy

Now that I am retired, folks ask me , “What do you do to pass the time?” That question makes me a little uncomfortable. The inquiry brings up vague pangs of guilt due to the list of things I WANT to accomplish that seems to get longer every day!

I moved here to Tucson from Washington, DC with a to-do list already in hand. Even though the COVID-19 isolation “free time” allowed me to chip away at my agenda, other projects kept creeping onto that roster of self-imposed tasks. Well, I SAY “self-imposed” ... but the truth is my darling Danny is an idea man. His brain never stops coming up with undertakings I would have never thought of doing myself.

You see, I'm a “let it be, man”; the kind-a fella who feels that “if it ain't broke, don't fix it”. I supposed that reaction comes less from accepting the way things are and more from pure laziness.

But Danny likes to “improve” things. He always says “if you don't change the things around you, your brain will get all Alzheimered up”. You can't argue with him on that. Again, he is always FULL of ideas. The thing is that he also says he is the idea man and little Stevie is the implementer of those ideas.

Look, I really don't mind most of the time. As I have said in other blog-things, I LIKE to figure stuff out. However, there are times when I have a loooong list of deeds already stacked up on my own activity list when his ideas are tossed my way.

Now one of the reasons my list has usually grown so loooooong is because I am a tried and true procrastinator. Allowing components on my own list to slip by time-wise is okay because, most of the time, I am the only one who cares that task gets completed. But when an inspiration comes from Danny, the implication is that his idea should be attended to in the very near future. With Danny's suggestion in the mix, I become acutely aware of all the stuff I was intending to do myself. This creates a spike of “procrastinator's guilt” I, otherwise, would not be feeling.

But ... after I calm down and actually take in what Danny is thinking about, the puzzle-solver side in my brain kicks in. When that happens, I begin to get all excited about the new task at hand and I don't mind pushing all the other things on my “make it happen” manifest a notch down the pecking order.

Many times Danny's ideas are not even for our benefit. Quite often, they are for the betterment of the community at large.

For example, a few months ago I suddenly found myself making eggplant parmesan and a huge salad for a group of volunteer 20-somethings who were here to give a year of their lives to aid the less fortunate in the Tucson area. Believe me, making

eggplant parmesan for 15 people was not on my list of things to do that day, but there I was, up to my elbows in eggplant and marinara sauce.

Throughout our time together, I have always said that Danny is going to get me into Heaven. More than once I have ridden his coat tails into a good situation. And I have always been grateful for his inspirations.

More recently, Danny became the co-leader of the Christian Hospitality Ministry at our little Presbyterian church. Part of the Hospitality gang's responsibility is to get the coffee and snacks together for before and after we have a church service. Well, of course, since COVID-19 put the kibosh on any kind of in-person gatherings, the Hospitality Ministry has been meeting online in order to figure out how they can remain relevant in light of the absence of physical bodies. They came up with a lovely idea.

Since our church services have been in the Zoom room every Sunday, there are a few members of the congregation we have "lost" either from the lack of computer savvy or simply from the lack of an actual computer or smart phone. The Ministry had decided to make small hospitality bags to deliver to these "missing" folks just to remind them our church membership is still thinking of them.

This is where Danny's brainstorm and the subsequent suggested tasks for little Stevie come in.

First, Danny asked me if I would be willing to sew small crosses the Ministry could paste on a business sized card to reflect a message of inclusion. I thought, "Okay. This is something that appeals to my creative side while I can be helping a good cause." So, even though I was in the middle of procrastinating my own list of stuff to do, I agreed to take on the challenge. Thus, I began to figure out which stitches would work best on my sewing machine in order to achieve said crosses.

Then Danny got to thinking maybe I could craft the phrase of inclusion that referenced the sewn cross they wanted placed on the card. Even though I was still working on the crosses, he asked me to come up with some sort of phrase or statement that could be printed on the card. So, I agreed to that task as well. I didn't mind ... my creative muscles were being massaged.

I knew the phrase needed to be in the form of a poem. I went to bed with part of it in my head. I woke up the next morning with the poem completed. (Funny how the brain works ... if you let it).

I quickly wrote the poem down before it evaporated from my elderly brain:

"This pocket cross is yours to keep,
Reminding you our care runs deep.
So with each touch you're sure to know,
God's Love is there where'er you go."

Meanwhile, I was still sewing crosses ... fifteen, to be exact.

Danny then suggested I put some kind of border around the crosses. So I looked at more stitches to see what worked best.

So, Danny printed out the poem onto business cards, but they did not scan evenly onto the paper. Danny didn't mind the phrase appeared in different spots on each card. But, my OCD kicked in and I felt the cards needed to be cut down to size so they would all be symmetrical. I ordered a paper cutter from Amazon Prime and it arrived the next day. I cut the cards down to a uniform size. However, I still had not finished the crosses.

When they WERE completed, I found myself pasting the finished crosses on the cards and laminating them as well. (Danny and I own a laminating machine). Then I used the cutting device to trim off the extra plastic from the lamination process.

Next Danny thought it would be nice if the cards could be hung on a keychain. So, there I was, ordering the grommets and chain to turn the cards into something one could attach to a keychain. Once those items came, it was I who punched, pounded, cut chain and linked the chain ends together.

I have to say, after the card/crosses were finally finished, I was tickled at the end result. Even though they weren't my idea, the doing was so satisfying; especially knowing they were going to a good cause.

But it wasn't over yet.

Danny asked me to make the cloth hospitality bags with which the Ministry would dole out "my" keychain card/crosses and other goodies. Being that I was now truly involved in the endeavor, I've been sewing my little heart out. As of this writing, I have almost completed them.

I should add, when Danny showed my first completed keychain card/cross to the rest of his Ministry group, they were ecstatic. So much so, they agreed there should be a bowl of them for each member of the congregation to take for their own when we return to in-person church services at the beginning of October.

We have over a hundred members in our church.

This time, it looks like Danny will be shoving me into Heaven.

Little by Little,
A blessed spouse

Keychain Card/Cross



Lunar-tic behavior

This past Wednesday, my darling Danny and I got all excited over the complete lunar eclipse that was appearing over Tucson, Areezoner. The bulk of this eclipse would only be seen over the Pacific Ocean, with just the eastern edges of Asia and Australia and the western edge of North America being in its line of vision.

Western U.S. of A!!! That is us!!!

I had seen a lunar eclipse once before in my lifetime. It was YEARS ago in the early 1980's when I was on the road on tour in the middle of the country somewhere ... Kansas? Missouri?

What I remembered was that as the main shadow of the Earth (the umbra) began to pass over the moon, the shadow was pitch black. That was until the moon was completely obliterated. The moment that happened, the entire shadow turned bright orange.

I had read the color was the reflection of the light from all the sunrises and sunsets on Earth bouncing off the darkened moon.

Anyway, that experience was really quite awesome. And I was looking forward to having the same experience here in Tucson-land in 2021.

Danny and I were particularly revved up because of the special circumstances surrounding when and where we were going to view it.

First, by wild coincidence, the eclipse was occurring during a "super moon". The moniker is given to a full moon that occurs when it is at its closest orbit to the Earth. This makes the moon appear much larger to the naked eye, eclipse or not.

Second, we live in an area north of Tucson that, by agreement, has very little street or outdoor house lights. This is because of the space observatory at the top of Mr. Lemmon. At 9,157 feet, Mt. Lemmon is the highest point of the mountain range running along next to SaddleBrooke, where we live. When our housing development was built, it was agreed that there would be no extraneous street lights in order to aid the observatory when it was in use. In addition, any private outside house lights needed to be of a specially dim wattage and turned off by 10:00pm. As a result, it is VERY dark in these parts at night; perfect for eclipse watching.

And third, we are in the middle of a drought that has lasted a few years now. As a result, our skies are usually crystal clear day AND night.

The lack of rain may not be so good for obvious reasons, however, who could ask for anything better for viewing the night sky?

So anyway, the full lunar eclipse was to happen from 4:11am through 4:25am Pacific Time. (Which Tucson is on during the summer months; that is until the country

“falls back” in the fall. Then we are on Mountain Time. For those of you not in the know, Arizona does not observe Daylight Savings Time. We never have to change our clocks. I think of it as another bonus to living in Tucson.)

But I digress ...

I set my little alarm for 4:00am! But I woke up at 3:40 ... it was too difficult to sleep. I had the same excitement as I did on a Christmas morning when I was a kid. I quietly got dressed and set out the binoculars I was anticipating using. I wandered around the house until I heard Danny stir out of a dream and told him it was time for the event. While he put something on, I went to the front door and opened it up. I was greeted by a beautiful early morning temperature of about 75 degrees; perfect for moon watching.

I was so excited, I couldn't wait for Danny to be completely ready, so I hurried outside and turned the corner of our garage to see ...

... NOTHING BUT A HAZY SMUDGE!!! The sky was CLOUDY!!!!

I stared and stared as if my eyes were playing tricks on me. Danny came out and we both gaped at the vague light of the moon's edge trying to strain its way through the haze.

“Christmas morning” had become a bust. I felt as if I got a piece of coal in my stocking.

I raised the binoculars, which had been dangling in my hand, to my eyes hoping that they would “make it all clearer”. I even said, “The binoculars help”. But they really didn't help that much. What I actually was thinking was, “WE ARE IN THE MIDDLE OF A DROUGHT FOR PETE'S SAKE! HOW CAN THERE BE CLOUDS???”

But there were ... hazy, sight obliterating clouds.

Danny sat down on one of our patio chairs and just stared to the smudged moon, hoping to see the orange through the miasma. I ran into the house to get out the telescope we had bought for viewing the mountains when we had our cabin in West Virginia. Hopefully, I raced back outside to set the telescope up on its tripod. I frantically directed the eyepiece to search the sky for an undimmed eclipse. All I found was clearer mush.

Eventually, while looking at the sky with our naked eyes, we could see a slight tinge of orange. Whether that was imagined or not, I really can't be sure. Maybe our hopeful minds were desperately creating something to make up for our disappointment.

We stayed outside until a little past 4:30, when the event was supposed to be over. We only knew for sure it was finished because of the time ... NOT BECAUSE WE ACTUALLY SAW ANYTHING!!!!!!

After going back inside and putting our useless scopes back in their places, I fell back into bed. I was asleep almost instantly ... as if I needed to get away from the whole sad affair as fast as I could.

The next morning, I stayed in bed a little longer, pondering the non-event of just a few hours before. I decided to be philosophical about the whole thing.

I remembered the most significant piece of truth I had learned in my many years walking this Earth: I should never take anything for granted. By doing so, I would be setting myself up for a probable disappointment. Believe me, from making my living in the theatre, this was particularly true when auditioning for a show.

However, I neglected to apply that same precept when it came to celestial happenings. By taking Mother Nature for granted, I allowed myself to be let down hard.

Maybe that's the lesson I needed to be reminded of that early morning. Do not take the world for granted. In these trying times, I shouldn't be thinking everything will be alright no matter how much I want it to be. As hopeful as I can be, it is time for me to take a reality check.

Otherwise, my existence may be eclipsed by something I don't want to see.

Watching out,
Mother Nature's son

Spirit filled

In the past, I have occasionally written about tales of preternatural happenings that I or a relative have experienced. These stories range from actual ghost sightings to a narrative that took place in the New York City subway and progressed into the realm of the spiritual. The account I am about to relate to you falls into the sphere of the latter.

Before I begin, I want to say, this is something I personally experienced. You are free to look at it from your own perspective and decide whether you are able to accept the reality of the happening or if you think I had totally lost my mind and was completely hallucinating. Whatever the case, I saw what I saw and experienced what I experienced.

One more thing: I have never told this to anyone before, including my darling Danny. So why tell it now? I am instinctual kind-a guy and I try to follow my gut feelings. I simply felt a deep inspiration this was the right moment to do so.

First, a little background...

A couple of Sunday's ago, the Christian church celebrated Pentecost. Pentecost is the observance of what is considered the birth of the Church. In the Bible, the events of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection have occurred. The disciples are gathered in a room when suddenly a sound like a roaring wind fills the house they are in. Each man is touched by, what is called, the Holy Spirit. Each one is overwhelmed with emotion and begins to speak in a language different than their own.

Well, we all know those stories from the Bible happened thousands of years ago and couldn't possibly have anything to do with our modern life.

Right?

When Danny and I still lived in Washington, DC, we attended a church that was a member of a greater institution of churches established specifically for gay and lesbian folks who had been rejected by their own churches. The organization is named the Metropolitan Community Churches. We belonged to MCC of Washington, DC. Danny and I had been part of the congregation that moved our worship services from a small townhouse to a brand new building for which we all had raised funds to construct. The building had a high barrel vaulted ceiling, supported by steel girders, cinder blocks and an amazing amount of glass. It was a bright, welcoming space. A center aisle split the congregation in two with a large chancel in the front of the sanctuary that ran the width of the room. (A chancel is the area used by the clergy and the choir during worship.) Being that I almost always sang in the choir, I was usually seated in the chancel, facing the congregation. This was the case on the morning my tale took place.

I remember it was a very bright, sunny day with the sunshine beaming in through the glass walls. There was a fairly full attendance of congregants that service. Our minister, Larry, was preaching a wonderfully inspirational, heartfelt sermon, as he usually did.

(As an aside, our pastor, Larry Uhrig, was a wonderful, funny man. He was a delightful human being who also had the gift of communication. His sermons were always personal, intelligent, interesting and, most importantly, very spiritual. We lost him in the 1990's after a long illness.)

Anyway, Larry had moved into the center aisle as he was preaching, although he remained close to the chancel. As I was watching him, I slowly became aware of a white mist developing in the back part of the sanctuary. It looked like a low-lying cloud or a light-colored smoke. At first, I thought the building was on fire. I relaxed when I saw that no one in the back was reacting in panic. I, then, became curious. As I watched, the mist grew denser, but never rose above the height of the seats of the chairs. As Larry continued to speak, the fog began rolling down the center aisle toward the chancel. As it reached each row of parishioners, it spread out along their feet. When it touched each congregant, that person would either jump to their feet or begin crying or verbally react to what Larry was saying. I had never experienced such a thing. Yes, our church tended to have verbal "amens" as was traditional in many southern churches, but this was something deeper; more reactive.

I gaped at the mist as it grew closer and closer to Larry and more and more of the crowd responded. When the pearly mist finally reached Larry's legs, I saw him physically buckle, as if he was momentarily hit by something he couldn't see. He kept speaking, but there was now even more passion in his voice.

I now realized the fog was rolling up onto the chancel and enveloping the choir. When I saw it caress my shins, I suddenly began to cry. The feeling was of overwhelming joy, gratitude and immense peace.

It was then I comprehended I had been WATCHING the Holy Spirit enter our church. It wasn't something far off in the past, nor was it something invisible. It was a corporeal, tangible entity.

As Larry finished speaking, the entire cloud disappeared. However, even though the mist had vanished, the lingering feeling of rapture remained. The feeling is difficult to explain. I felt physically exhausted, yet, at the same time, still internally energized.

I was stunned by the entire experience. However, I never spoke of it. I think because, at the time, I felt it was so personal, the need to express what happened really wasn't necessary. Also because it was such an extraordinary occurrence, I didn't want the encounter to be diminished by nay-sayers.

Seeing the mist did happen to me one other time a few years later, but not to such a degree. The smoke appeared in that same church and, as it had before, rolled down the center aisle. However, this time, I was sitting in the congregation. I just watched it billow down the aisle without the fog entering the rows where folks were seated. As it reached the front of the church, it simply dissipated. I just thought to myself, "The Holy Spirit" and left it at that.

And that's my story.

This tale is not meant to convert or threaten or cajole anyone by any means. Your certainties are your own. This is just another narrative from my life that I felt the need to share with you. However, whether or not you were touched by what I experienced, in my mind and in my heart, I will always know there is a force greater than us which is there to watch over us all.

And that is my truth.

Believe it or not,
A present-day disciple

Retro eatin'

I like to watch cooking shows on television. I've always been partial to them ever since Graham Kerr, "The Galloping Gourmet" was bouncing around his kitchen in the late 1960's. I really enjoyed watching him create dishes out of almost nothing. Plus, he was so perky! On the other hand, the French culinary skills of the fascinating Julia Child, while enormously entertaining, seemed unattainable to mirror in my little world. I always felt that viewing Julia's programs was like going to a museum: very interesting, but I could only "look and not touch".

Anyway, I was delighted when, later, the concept of network cooking shows came into existence. Being in the theatre, I couldn't always watch television when I wanted. However, with cooking shows, there was no continuous story line between airings. I could drop in whenever it was convenient and not feel like I had missed a mince.

Fast forward to retired living in Tucson, "Areezoner". I am ardent about making sure I record every new "Chopped" episode on the Food Network. (We NEVER watch anything live ... WAAAY too many commercials!)

Recently, I watched an installment of "Chopped" while eating my lunch (how appropriate). The theme the producers came up with was "Retro '60's Food". The participating chefs (none of which had even been born before the 1970's ... much to my dismay) had to come up with reimagined fare made from food that was popular in the 1960's. Some of the items the chefs had to work with and transform included a chocolate Bundt cake, Swedish meatballs with grape jelly sauce and, that old 1960's staple, cheese fondue.

(Surprisingly, there was no Jello salad with pineapple and shredded carrots, but I suppose that was more of a 1950's goodie. Thinking about it now, my long suffering mother didn't like Jello or Jello pudding. As popular and well advertised as those products were, no wiggling, molded or gloppy anything crossed the threshold of our house....)

Because I was born in 1954, I consider myself a true child of the '60's. With this fact in hand, that 1960's themed episode got my little brain a-churning: "What was I eating during those years?"

What would I consider to be a "1960's food"?

At first, I became hard-pressed to come up with ANYTHING that was specifically 1960's. Everybody had cookouts with hot dogs, hamburgers and potato chips. But, nowadays, everybody is STILL enjoying the same thing.

Casseroles were popular. I loved my mother's tuna noodle casserole made with cream of mushroom soup that had crushed potato chips sprinkled generously over the

top. Come to think of it, cream of mushroom soup was a 1960's kind of food. The product seemed to be in at least one item at almost every meal. I KNOW everyone must remember green bean casserole made with cream of mushroom soup. The best part, however, were the French's French fried onions from a can spread on top. 1960's cooking at its finest, baby!

By the way, an odd thing I remember about those canned onions is that nobody actually ate them as a snack. They were always reserved for the green bean casserole.

My mother also made a chicken dish that was semi-casserole in nature. It was rice, water, cream of mushroom soup all mixed together in a baking dish, with chicken breasts resting on top. After cooking for an hour at 350 degrees, you had 1960's chicken and rice magic!

Sugar sweetened cereals really exploded in the late 1950's. But their heyday hit in the 1960's. Cap'n Crunch and Honeycomb were both staples in our house. I remember cramming my face with handfuls of the stuff while watching "Lost in Space". (Healthy.)

I suppose kid-lings are still eating grossly sugared cereals these days. However, back then, the addition of "fortified vitamins" were considered healthy enough to offset all that sweetness. Back in the day, being naive made eatin' junk so much more fun!

And speaking of sweet stuff ... I have to mention a 1960's dessert of SOME kind. The first thing that comes to mind is angel food cake. "Heavenly!" (See what I did there?) Spongy, sugary clouds of deliciousness! I always asked for an angel food cake for my birthday. I don't know if people even make it anymore.

Sad.

Since our household didn't have dessert on a regular basis, other than rainbow sherbet or butter pecan ice cream, the only dessert items that come to mind is my mother's mother's pies at holiday time. And, thank the GOOD Lawd, pies have never gone out of fashion.

Pre-prepared goods were also coming into their popularity in the 1960's. Rice-a-Roni, "the San Francisco Treat" ran endless commercials touting their rice concoction. Hamburger Helper was being hyped as well.

Chef Boyardee spaghetti in the can hit the ground running in the '40's in order to feed the hungry G.I.s. for the war effort. But it became hugely popular by the masses in the '50's and '60's. That's not to say it was ever served in our home. My Dad's side of the family is Italian. It would be a sacrilege to bring "canned spaghetti" into the house. But I eventually did get to eat some.

The occasion happened when I was visiting my school chum, Beth Ahles. I guess we were both about six or seven years old. I was staying for lunch and Beth's mother

served Chef Boyardee spaghetti. I remember being very excited to taste it because I had seen it on television but never had tried the stuff. That fervor very quickly disappeared with my first mouthful. I wasn't even sure what I was eating was spaghetti. It certainly wasn't anything I had experienced thus far in my short life. I choked it down, even gagging a bit. But I knew it wouldn't be polite to wretch up my lunch on their kitchen floor, so I steeled myself and mostly finished the slimy substance that had been so nicely placed in front of me.

Ugh.

Like every other decade before and after the 1960's, there were good and questionable things about the time period; including the food. However, because of my innate need to wax nostalgic, I choose to look back on the positive aspects of those years, especially the gratification worthy cuisine. Although, I confess, I don't remember everything. I suppose it's human nature to blank out the not-so-nice aspects of anything from one's memory ... especially if it involves canned pasta.

Still enjoying the good stuff,
A boy of the '60's

Happy Anniversary

On June 5, 2020, a bolt of lightning struck the west flank of the Santa Catalina Mountains, just north of the city of Tucson. The resulting blaze, named “The Bighorn Fire” caused a month-long conflagration that destroyed almost 120,000 acres of wilderness.

(How’s that for a dramatic opening?)

Thankfully and thanks to the tireless work of the fire fighters and their supporting crews, no one was harmed nor were any homes or businesses lost.

And just as new growth springs from spent infernos such as “The Bighorn Fire” ... that blaze from one year ago was the “spark” that started this whole blog-thing going. You see, my writings were not originally intended for sharing memories and self-humiliation. Nooo ...

After the lightning struck and the bonfire began, friends and relatives across the country started freaking out (just a little) due to the fact that they knew my darling Danny, my poor father and myself had moved to Tucson from Washington, DC just three years earlier. Plus Danny, now, had a horse stabled just at the bottom of the mountain. Suspecting our little quartet might be in the thick of things ... which we were ... I began writing a daily chronicle on AOL in order to keep everyone informed of the fire’s progress. It was my attempt at avoiding any gnashing of teeth or tearing of clothes by my familiars (Biblical reference there).

Danny, then, suggested I start posting the accounts on Facebook as well, so as to assuage the worries of any other parties who might be interested.

A few weeks went by with us being on “pins and needles” from anticipation. However, once the imminent danger from the fire had passed and Danny and I could finally unpack our most treasured possessions from our car (yes, it had come to that), I felt comfy enough to begin slipping in some light banter and an occasional bon mot in amidst the daily blog-things.

(As an aside, one never knows WHAT one will consider “treasured possessions” until one has a wildfire cauterizing one’s front door.)

Well, the less I wrote about the fire and the more I added in my somewhat, over-the-top commentaries, the more folks read my little compositions. Five weeks later, by the time the fire had gone the way of the dinosaur, my blog-thing had become an actual journal. (Although, I still prefer to refer to it as a “blog-thing”. It is what it is.)

However, with the blaze over, I was feeling there was really nothing else to write about. The blog-thing’s original purpose had burned out, as it were. When I attempted to put a stop to my installments and slip away into my Arizona sunset years, a cry of

anguish rose up from you all now trapped in your own homes. Although, YOUR confinement wasn't from fire, but from the now raging COVID-19 pandemic. Apparently, in the isolation of your homes, you were being entertained (and distracted) by my foibles and follies. It was then, you kind people "out there in the dark" convinced me I could not possibly stop myself from sharing my personal experiences and semi-mental illness. Perhaps it was out of the need for some kind of therapy; for both you all and the recognition that I maaay need it as well.

Thus, over the weeks (which turned into months), I tried my best to hinder readers from drifting off by engaging everyone with the tippy-toppest of tales that I could conjure.

And the MOST unbelievable thing about the whole she-bang, was that you all stuck with me! For that, I am unbelievably grateful. Actually, that's probably the SECOND most unbelievable thing. The FIRST was the fact my short attention span didn't kick in and cause me to wander away from the ongoing project. I think that was because your keen interest kept me going; especially when you added your own thoughts and experiences to my stories. And for THAT I am also very grateful.

So, here we are, one year later. I am still scrawling and you are still reading. I counted out the pages I've put out and estimated the number of words I've written. From what I figger, I have enough material for, at least, THREE books! Now I just need to find a literary agent.

Oh, well. All in good time. Meanwhile, I will attempt to slog away and try not to run out of things to talk about. And who knows what another year will bring? Maybe another book's worth of material will appear.

As long as there isn't another fire to "inspire" me. I've learned I can do without that kind of motivation.

Happy Anniversary!
Ernest Cupoway

Going through the changes

I recently watched a national newscast that addressed the subject of drought in the southwestern part of the United States. The broadcast displayed a color coded map that showed an area of moderate drought in orange, extreme drought in light red and extraordinary drought in deep, dark blood red. Tucson and the area surrounding the city fell into that deathly blood colored hue.

Have you ever heard or seen the term “extraordinary drought”? Well we of “extraordinary drought” are fully aware that climate change is no longer simply a catchphrase presented in the media. You need to know, it ain’t rainin’ in the lower left hand part of your country. As a matter of fact, I can think of only one time since JANUARY we have had a significant rain. And that only amounted to no more than a 1/4 of an inch!

It is dry!

While most of the rest of you on the Eastest coast and Middlish heartlands are experiencing “extraordinary” rainfall, we, in the lower west are parched and getting parchier.

I read in the paper today that Lake Mead, behind the Hoover Dam and is fed by the Colorado River, which serves as a major water supply for Utah, Nevada, Southern California and, yes, Arizona is at it’s lowest level since it was created in 1937. The water level in the lake has dropped 145 feet since the year 2000. The experts estimate the lake is at 37% capacity. Those same experts have stated the rapid drop in water is unprecedented and unexpected. That is alarming since it is the largest “man-made” lake this side of the Mississippi River.

And speaking of the Mississippi, there is a concept being shuttled around by the powers-that-be that involves connecting the Mississippi River to the Colorado River by a massive pipeline. The reasoning being, if it can be done for the distribution of oil, why not water? I think the idea, while intriguing, is just a pipe dream. (See what I did there?) The cost alone would make any politician overly nervous. But, as far reaching that plan may be, it still doesn’t address the overall problem of climate change. The concept is not unlike putting a band-aid on a burn on your hand while your house goes up in flames.

Anyway, drought is no laughing matter. Not only are we in danger of shriveling up like “A Raisin in the Sun” (theatrical reference), we are in extreme danger of even MORE fire due to the seared landscape. After all the “fun” we had from last year’s fire here in Tucson-land, I am experiencing a little flashback trepidation from the thought of having to, once again, pack up our car with our most precious items.

However, that said, the fires in Arizona have already begun. A couple of hours' car ride north of here, two fires are quite ablaze. They have already burned over 100,000 acres and are only about 40% contained.

I also just read, this kind of drought has not been documented since the weather began to be recorded over 150 years ago. I expect by this time next year, everybody down here will need to shut down and turn off their irrigation "drip systems" that keep all their non-native plants thriving. Hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of flora will go bye-bye. At least the native species will have a chance to show off a little in peoples' yards.

Although, that only goes for the domesticated non-native plants. Part of the problem that has led to the recent intense burns are non-native WILD plants that are usurping the indigenous plants. The worst of these is something called buffelgrass. Buffelgrass was brought to Arizona from Africa in the 1930's for erosion control. And, like many ill-conceived notions, without any natural "predators" in the mix, the non-natives ran amok. Due to the grass not needing hardly any water to live, it is now edging out many of the native species. And the worst part is the plant burns hot and fast when it catches fire. As a result of the intensity of the blaze it causes, cacti and trees that would have otherwise survived a burn are dying by the thousands. In order to try to remedy the problem in Tucson, we now have troops of volunteers that go out every day to pull up and destroy the buffelgrass. However, the work puts only a dent in the ongoing problem. And, again, that larger problem is climate change.

Whether you believe climate change is being caused by human beanz (it is) or whether the radically changing climate is simply a natural phenomenon (exacerbated by us'uns), change is happening now and it is happening fast; especially here in the Greater Southwest. The solutions are truly up to us. We all need to do what we can NOW before it becomes too late for the quality of life we have grown to love. Remember, even a brief letter to your local Congressperson is something you can do.

I know in the past, I have regaled you all on the beauty of this area around Tucson. How much of a paradise this Sonoran Desert truly is. And, I truly believe that is all still true. The sad thing, though, is that due to climate change and the way those changes support invasive species, this beautiful and special landscape might become a "Paradise Lost".

Doing my best rain dance,
A concerned citizen

Fun facts

If Paris, France is “The City of Lights”, where is “The Electric City”? Some of you may already know. It is my hometown of Schenectady, New York! That is because, in 1892, Thomas Alva Edison moved his Edison Machine Works from Menlo Park, New Jersey to Schenectady where it became the headquarters of the General Electric Company.

And did you ever wonder where the zip code of 12345 was in the United States? It is the zip code assigned to that very same General Electric plant in good ol’ Schenectady.

Now you know.

The other day, for some reason, my little brain began batting around trivia about Schenectady. There was no reason really. I suppose as my conscious brain begins to fade away, those little pieces of buried minutiae trickle themselves up to the surface. Thus, I found myself recently flooded with “fun” trifles about Schenectady, New York ... that, whether desired by you or not, I am going to share with you now.

And besides, you never know WHEN you will need to use these facts. Something could happen where, in a life or death situation, you will need to recall where the zip code 12345 is located. You will THEN be thanking me. You’ll see.

In the meantime ...

- The name “Schenectady” was derived from a Mohawk Indian word meaning “beyond the pines”.

- Schenectady’s other sobriquet is “The City that Lights and Hauls the World”. That is because, besides having General Electric within the city’s boundaries, the American Locomotive Company was founded there in 1901. For almost a century, American Locomotive built practically every locomotive train used around the world ... literally. If you ever see one of those giant engines from the 20th century up close and personal, most likely there will be a “Schenectady, New York” embossed somewhere on its side.

- Schenectady was founded as a stockade fort by Dutch settlers on the banks of the Mohawk River in 1661. After an unfortunate run in with the local Mohawk Indians and some French trappers in the late 1600’s, in which the burgeoning settlement was almost obliterated, the new village took hold and grew into a thriving city. As a matter of fact (“fun fact”), that original Stockade District still exists. It actually has buildings standing that date back to the 17th century. (More trivia: my father’s father was born and raised in the Stockade District.)

- Schenectady was a major hub of transportation throughout the 19th century. The Erie Canal ran through a major part of the city from 1825 to 1918. Also, the very

first railroad company chartered in the United States was the Mohawk and Hudson Railroad, established in 1826. Regular excursions between Albany and Schenectady became the backbone of their business and began the inception of rail as an industry in this country.

- The Abolitionist movement took hold in Schenectady. Although it didn't actually begin in the city, by 1830 Schenectady became the mecca for anyone wanting to make a difference in excising the slave trade from these shores.

- One of the oldest colleges in America, Union College, was founded in 1795. (As a sidebar, the movie "The Way We Were" starring Barbra Streisand and Robert Redford was partially filmed in 1972 at Union College.)

- WGY was the second commercial radio station to broadcast in the United States. The station began airing on February 20, 1922. The "W" stands for "wireless", the "G" for "General Electric" and the "Y" is the last letter in Schenectady. The station is still operating to this day under those same call letters.

- The development of the first atomic bomb took root at the General Electric research lab before the program (known as "The Manhattan Project") moved to Los Alamos, New Mexico.

- And of almost equal importance, Price Chopper Supermarkets are based in Schenectady.

- Did you also know that the author Kurt Vonnegut lived in Schenectady where he worked for General Electric? He wrote his novel "Player Piano" there. The setting of the book is Schenectady in the future.

- So, speaking of famous people, Schenectady has its share:

* Ann B. Davis (Alice on the "Brady Bunch") was a native.

* Shirley Muldowney, the first female to receive a license from the National Hot Rod Association, grew up in Schenectady.

* George Westinghouse, inventor and innovator, also grew up in Schenectady.

* Dave Garroway, the original host of "The Today Show" on NBC was born in Schenectady.

* The actor, Mickey Rourke was from Schenectady.

And, who could forget Schenectady's favorite son ...

* Ted Kacsynski, the Unibomber, was a Schenectadian.

* Oh! And me.

So there.

I hope your whistle has been whetted and your interest has been piqued. As I've said, you never know when all this information will come in handy. To repeat, your life may someday depend on it.

I am happy to have helped.

Keeping you informed,
The trivial pursuiter

“I’m innocent!”

Here’s a rhetorical question for all y’all:

Have you ever been in a situation where you are made to feel badly or guilty for something you didn’t do, weren’t directly involved with, or even worse, stemmed from a natural behavior?

I seem to have lived my life that way.

Granted, I have a tendency to feel guilty about a lot of things. If someone cuts in line, I don’t have a problem telling them where the line actually is. However, I always feel guilty afterward. I supposed my reaction comes from my need to be “the good ol’ reliable nice guy”. When that concept is doubted or challenged, I feel poorly or guilty. I suppose this is for no other reason than the standard I place on myself. I always want to be perceived as “the good guy”.

My inner reaction is even worse if a negative assertion occurs when I am being completely myself.

For example, when I was in seventh grade, my social studies teacher had me go up to the chalk board at the front of the class and write in some answers to fill-in-the-blank questions that had been written there. I mostly knew all the answers, but miswrote one of the “fill-ins”. I began to giggle, which was my normal reaction to anything I did that I perceived as “goofy”. He reprimanded me by saying, “stop acting like a giddy, little, second-grade girl”. (He was a big oaf of a guy who was the wrestling coach. I suppose I wasn’t being macho enough for him.) Not only was I mortified for being “called out” in front of my peers, I felt guilty for something that was absolutely instinctual for me. I wasn’t tittering out of a malicious intent to disrupt the class. I was reacting naturally. Even though I was innocent, I immediately felt guilty. And that discomfort stayed with me for quite a while. It wasn’t until I was older did I come to realize the guy was just a jerk.

Even as an adult, I felt guilty for a reprimand that I felt was unfair and harsh. In the late 1980’s, just after I had moved to Washington, DC, I was working in the box office of a very famous landmark arts center. When a lull in business occurred while I was at the ticket window, I began talking with another ticket seller who was sitting to my left. We began to laugh about whatever it was we were yakking about. Very quickly, a supervisor came up to us and told us we should not be laughing because it was unprofessional. I immediately stopped conversing and turned away. As I sat there fuming, a feeling of guilt began to creep into my psyche. Yes, we were laughing, but we were not roaring. However, in this situation, in spite of my guilty feelings, I was old enough to know that, even though she made me feel badly, I was innocent of her

negative appraisal. However, at that time of my life, I could do something about it. I stopped working there and took another job. I certainly wasn't going to work anyplace where being myself was a "detriment".

Then there was the time where my being "the nice guy" got me into trouble. In my freshman year in college in 1972, my very first dorm roommate introduced himself to me as "Beerbrain". As I got to know him a bit better, the nickname was very appropriate. He was a party boy who, every night, got together with his pals. This always involved imbibing copious amounts of beer. When they stayed in the dorm and had their beer blasts in house, "Beerbrain" would save the empty cans and stack them in our dorm room window.

The dorm building was fairly new at the time and had very large, broad windows with deep window sills. He was able to stack an enormous amount of cans, three deep in that window. He estimated there were about three hundred beer cans in his "installation".

Because of my "Mr. Nice Guy" attitude, I didn't want to rock-the-boat and tell him how horrified I was at his endeavor. My natural passivity kept me mute.

One warm autumn night, he was able to squeeze his fingers through a small space just to the side of the beer can sculpture to barely crack the window open for some air. After going to bed, about two in the morning, a strong wind grew outside. Needless to say, three hundred empty beer cans hit the tiled floor in one huge concussion. Since I had previously been sound asleep, it took me a bit to figure out what had happened. Just about the time I had peeled myself off the ceiling, the R.A. (Residence Assistant) was banging on our door. Apparently, the detonation of sound woke most of the dorm. The R.A. chewed us out! Words like "irresponsible" and "dangerous" were thrown at us. At the time, I blamed the whole terrible situation on myself. If I had only said something to "Beerbrain". Or if I had thrown out some of the cans myself, we wouldn't be standing there. My guilt was palpable.

A few years later, when re-telling the story to a friend, I realized my passivity was the only "misguided" thing I did. The onus really fell on "Beerbrain" for being the culprit of the "crime". I knew I wasn't a total innocent, but that was enough to make me feel guilty for somebody else's misdeed.

But then there are situations where you truly are innocent of any misconduct, yet you are still made to feel guilty. Just the other day, something happened to me that I am still stewing about.

When my darling Danny, my poor father and I moved to Tucson four years ago, we naturally set out to find a bank in which we needed to deposit the millions and millions of dollars we brought down with us (cough!) After finding a federal credit

union we liked, Danny and I opened an account for ourselves and then opened a separate account for my father. In addition, we brought in the documents needed to show that Danny and I had Power of Attorney for my dad's affairs.

Deed done; time passes.

Last week, dad received a check in the mail for a government refund he was due. Usually, any of my father's income is deposited directly online, so receiving a "hard" check was unusual. Anyway, I took the check to the bank and intended to deposit it into his account; his bank, his check, his account. Granted, he had not endorsed the check, but, I assumed, because I had Power on Attorney, I would just sign the check, deposit it and go on my way. The teller wouldn't do the transaction. His reason was that the check wasn't signed. I told him I would sign it and my Power of Attorney was on record there at the bank. He said it wasn't. He said he would check to see if it was on file, but didn't move from his spot. When I told him I had filed it four years before when I opened the account, he asked, "Who did you work with?" In disbelief, I had to remind him, "It was four years ago!!!" I didn't remember the name! Then I was told we had to wait for the manager and I was welcome to sit and wait. After ten minutes I left.

I was actually made to feel like I was a criminal when, of course, I was completely innocent. And, YES, I felt guilty, which made me even madder. The situation conjured a really "icky" feeling.

After I went home, Danny suggested I deposit the check online, which I should have done in the first place ... so I did.

No, we are not going to change banks. One bad apple in the bunch doesn't mean they are all bad. As a matter of fact, up until that point, their staff had been extraordinarily caring and attentive.

But, in order to diffuse my consternation at them for making me feel like a crook, I will first march down there with father and paperwork in hand and MAKE SURE the Power of Attorney is attached to their records. I will, then, give them a salvo of "what's the idea" and "bad customer service". And finally (per Danny's suggestion) put it all down in writing.

THAT should make me feel better.

I just wish the subliminal guilty pang would go away. Some things are easier to take care of than others.

Order in the court!

Judge Judy

Follow-up to “I’m innocent!”

So!

As you may recall from a very recent blog-thing, I was seriously “dissed” (“disrespected” for those not lingo-savvy) by a bank employee when I attempted to deposit a check made out to my poor father into said poor father’s account. Well, because the minutia of my life is SO important to everyone, I know you all are just ITCHING to know what happened when I went back to the bank a few days later.

As intended, I, my darling Danny and my poor father went to the bank to have the missing Power of Attorney attached to my dad’s account. (As a matter of record, both Danny and I have Power of Attorney over my father’s financial and health affairs.) By wild coincidence, the only employee available when we arrived was the same stone faced fellow with which I had that initial uncomfortable run-in. (I will refer to him as “J” ... his first initial).

When we walked in, “J” had a professional smile on his face as he said “May I help you?” However, when I approached him, as soon as he recognized me, his face fell and his eyes glazed over.

Without acknowledging our first encounter of a few days earlier, I simply said, “I am here with my spouse and my father in order to put a Power of Attorney on the record in my father’s account.”

He looked at me as if he were a kid caught stealing cookies.

After some hesitation, “J” began to look up the information he needed on his computer, as I presented my father’s account numbers (checking and savings, of course) and the Power of Attorney to him.

Out of the blue, he suddenly looked up from his computer screen and blurted, “Would you like some water?”

I took it to mean, HE needed some water to swallow the “crow” I was asking him to eat. (You know, as in to “eat crow”?)

Anyway, “J” took the Power of Attorney papers and crossed the lobby to photocopy the documentation and get water for Danny, dad and myself.

When “J” returned to me still standing at his teller “window”, he vaguely indicated that our little party should go into one of the side offices and that he would be joining us in a minute. Unfortunately, he wasn’t clear on WHICH office to occupy, so there was some sitting down, standing up and moving about in order to get into the correct office.

After all four of us settled in (I, dad, Danny and “J”), an air of strained politeness permeated the room ... that is, except for my dad making unsolicited remarks about the

decor. Dad finally got the hint to “please sit quietly, like a good boy”, and he settled down.

It was then I said something like, “I know we were here a few years ago to do this same thing. “J” kept looking at the computer screen. As “J” again looked at dad’s account on the computer, he suddenly and almost off-handedly remarked, “You are in here as a beneficiary of his account. Maybe there was some misunderstanding”. I then thought to myself that “J” MUST have seen that same record when I went in the week before. But he never acknowledged that bit of “trivia” to me. I was glad he, at least, said it out loud, because, in his own odd way, he was admitting that something might have gone wrong in the past.

I just said, “It’s nice to know I’m not losing my mind. We WERE here a few years ago, even if it was a misunderstanding.”

“J”’s face didn’t change.

At that point, “J” discovered something else was amiss from a few years back. The bank’s system would not allow him to print out any auto-filled forms that were needed for this Power of Attorney transaction. Whomever had helped us those years before caused all changes in the account to be frozen and could now only be done by hand. As he printed out the blank forms, he made a weak joke of needing to brush up his hand-writing skills.

The rest of the meeting went well. Danny and I filled out the forms we needed to complete and dad did his due diligence by signing on the dotted (albeit, electronic) line. We were all terribly professional and polite.

When the paperwork was completed and “J” told us we were done, Danny left to start up the car to “cool it off” and dad followed him out. This left “J” and I alone in the office.

I did not stand.

I, then, calmly spoke to him. “Is there a policy with the bank where they will issue a letter of apology?”, I inquired.

He looked at me somewhat confused. I went on.

“Because that misunderstanding you spoke of from a few years ago caused you and I to have our own misunderstanding just a few days ago.”

He now looked very uncomfortable. I continued.

“When I came in a few years ago, I was very clear that I wanted my Power of Attorney attached to my dad’s account. Even though you were not involved with that transaction, you yourself admitted that the bank’s employee made an error. For that, the bank owes me an apology.”

He stared at me.

“However, just a few days ago, that error caused an unfortunate situation between you and I. I went home very upset. I have always known this bank to have wonderful customer service. However, you made a decision to treat me as though I was a criminal. You froze me out and refused to go the extra mile to help me. For that, I think I am owed an apology.”

He continued to stare with no emotion.

He finally said, “I’ve never written one”.

I said, “I think it would be good customer service if you wrote one now ... on behalf of the bank.”

He coldly remarked, “Do you want it on letterhead or just an email?”

I returned, “It doesn’t matter. I would just like one in order to show good faith.”

I stood and said, “Thank you for your help today”, and walked out.

And then I felt guilty.

I know! I know! I have to get over it. But these kinds of confrontations, even as “civilized” as they are, still give me major “icks”.

However, I have decided, because of my long history with working with the public in a myriad of box offices and being hyper-aware of good customer service, it was important to speak up rather than ignoring it. Yes, the confrontation caused me angst; bordering on mania. However a profound obligation to correct bad service, along with my commitment to help people be aware how their actions affect others, far outweighed my need to let the whole situation “slide”.

Well, now we shall see what happens. If I don’t receive my letter, I will write to the managers of the bank with the blow-by-blow. I will probably even plagiarize myself and copy my blog-things. Heck, it’s a whole lot easier than writing the whole episode out again!

BUT ... if I do receive that letter, I will let the whole ugly chapter go. I really need to put this behind me.

I suppose it’s now all up to my new best friend “J”.

Relying on the kindness of strangers,
The Plunderer of Financial Institutions

Singin' in the Rain

Over the past weeks, I have informed you (moaned, groaned and kvetched) about the fact that we here in Tucson-land are in the middle of a historic drought.

Thank you for your patience.

However, what is unique about this area in the Lower LeftWest is, when we experience rain, it comes in the form of a real-live monsoon season. The season usually lasts from mid-June to mid-September. The phenomenon has something to do with the extreme summer heat causing moisture from the Pacific to be drawn into our area in the form of wind and rain.

I realize, when you envision a "monsoon", you probably are picturing an area in Bangladesh with unfortunate souls wading through waist deep water with their belongings balanced on their heads. All the while, being pummeled by dense, unrelenting rainfall.

Well, we may not have the non-stop downpours that would cause us to heft our new-ish Jeep Grand Cherokee onto our shoulders, it can rain hard enough here to cause some fairly serious flooding on the normally dry roads and washes. (So you know, a wash is a dry stream bed.) That's because the desert "soil" is so hard-packed and dense, the rainwater isn't readily absorbed and simply runs off in torrents. When we first moved here, I thought it odd there were signs posted near roads next to dry washes that stated, "Do not enter when flooded". We were in a desert, for pity's sake! However, now I know why the sign posts were put there in the first place.

Don't get me wrong. We want it to rain down here. By the time the real heat arrives, we are tired of the daily sunny skies and are craving ANY kind of moisture the heavens are willing to give up.

That is, IF it "decides" to rain.

Monsoons in the Southwest are a fickle lot. Occasionally, one will see the afternoon clouds building up and darkening. You become sure the liquid onslaught is coming. But then ... nothing. Or even worse, you will see it raining off to the north or to the south of you ... complete with the full drama of intense thunder and lightning ... however, where you are standing, it is sunny and calm. Usually, when that happens, there is a lot of cursing and whining from the inhabitants who have been left high and dry. My darling Danny always jokes how SaddleBrooke (the community where we live) had a dome built over it. More often than not, the rain clouds would split to the left or right before getting to our area. It seemed we were forever doomed to arid isolation.

I have to add this phenomenon happens a lot down here. Rain rarely happens as it does in any other part of the U.S. of A. I have lived in. As an East Coaster, I was used to

a day or two of overcast skies with the rain pouring down in a 25 to 50 square mile radius. If I was getting rain, I knew everybody around me was getting rain. Not here. Here, you can be experiencing sunny, blue skies, while just three blocks from you, your neighbors are building the next Ark. It's odd to be driving down the road and observe one small cloud off in the distance generating an isolated downpour. Everyplace else around it is in the sun.

Crazy.

Anyway, last year, our monsoon season hardly happened at all. After an early wet spring, any rain that was expected hardly ever happened. It was as if the season itself had decided to observe the COVID-19 restrictions and go into self-imposed isolation.

It was dry, baby, dry.

This year, however, the pundits who are supposedly in the know promised us a wetter monsoon season. Danny and I had our doubts, but, BOY, we're proven wrong! Last week, we were first delighted by a nice wet storm that gave us 3/8ths of an inch of rain in about 20 minutes. After having NO rain for over three months and negligible rain for almost SIX months, we became giddy!

However, two days later, we were stunned by a storm that unleashed an INCH AND A HALF of rain in barely a half an hour! The rain and wind were so fierce, we could barely see the houses across the street! After it was over, and I hunted down our patio chairs, along with moving a neighbor's garbage can that had floated out into the middle of the street, Danny, our friend Fran and I went to dinner that had been scheduled a few days before. While driving to the restaurant near downtown Tucson, we observed some flooding and even an occasional downed tree. Danny said he even saw a tree in a parking lot that had fallen and crushed a parked car.

The next day, I read we had something called a land spout. It was a new term to me. Apparently, a land spout is like a tornado, however, instead of originating in the clouds, a land spout starts its circulation on the ground and joins the clouds after gaining some momentum. I suppose it is like a "dust devil" on steroids.

The event was all very dramatical.

And so, next time I am lamenting about any lack of precipitation and decide to begin my rain dance, I will need to reel in my fervor in order to temper the intensity of the requested rain. I suppose it's my own fault. I have always been a bit too exuberant.

Looking for that rainbow,
The Rain Maker

Making ends meet

Throughout the entire time I have been offering up these blog-things, whenever I speak of my family life from my distant childhood, I often seem to mention the fact that we didn't have a lot of money.

When I was living in the midst of those years, I never got the sense that we were lacking in any way. Nor did I ever feel unhappy in our semi-pauper-dom. In fact, I just assumed most people lived the way we did. Even when I went over to the homes of friends or family members, I never fell into comparing what they had versus what we had. I simply admired their ways and means without ever thinking, "I wish we had that". My mind simply never worked that way.

Recently, my darling Danny and I were over at our friend Fran's house and we all got to talking about our childhoods. The more I related my memories, the more I thought, "Gosh! We were really poor in those early years." This, naturally led me to say, "This will make good blog-thing material!".

Apparently, my mind still works in the same way as when I was a kid: instead of feeling sorry for myself, my thoughts turn to how I can make my experience into something positive; "lemons into lemonade", as it were.

So, here are some random flashes that come to mind with regard to life back in my early days.

Oh! If you suddenly feel as if you are experiencing *deja vu*, I want to assure you that you are not having a psychic episode. I have written of some of these incidents before. However, this is the first time I am compiling them into one tidy package. Also, I really want to reiterate that I am not feeling sorry for myself. My gut reaction is more of a feeling of awe that I lived through this and never had a negative thought about what was my reality back then.

- My first memory of where we lived was in an old three story apartment house that had been converted from a hotel built in the mid-1800's. Way back when, the building's original purpose was accommodations for folks riding on the Erie Canal. There had been a "stop" near the bottom of the hill on which the hotel was situated. People would get off the barges and take a private service carriage up to the hotel. The building's halls and stairways, where one would use to get to their rooms, were a very dark mahogany wainscoting. Those access ways were lit by one dim ceiling lamp on every floor and stairwell. When the hotel was converted into apartments, only the interior walls separating the rooms were removed. As a result, every room in our apartment had a door to the access hallway. There were two apartments on each of the

two upper floors, with the landlady and her son living in a large apartment on the first floor. At the time we lived there, the third floor occupants had to move out because the floors boards had become unstable and were considered “dangerous”. We lived on the second floor, apparently without the trepidation of falling through.

- We had no private bathroom. There was one “water closet” on the second floor that only contained a commode. We shared that facility with the family who lived across the hall from us. I remember, when I had to “go” in the middle of the night, I hated going out into the hallway because the dark wood and dim light creeped me out. More often than not, rather than leave the apartment, I would pull out the kitchen drawers in order to use them as a ladder to climb up on the small counter. Then I could pee in the kitchen sink! (I obviously didn’t know about germs then.)

- When my brother John and I were still very small, we were bathed in our kitchen sink. However we quickly outgrew that facility. My poor father’s mother had given us her old wringer/washer. That appliance was round and stood up on legs with caster wheels. It also had a wringing mechanism that hung from the side of the washer with which to remove any excess water from your garments. My dad would wheel the machine in from the outside hallway where it was usually stored. He would, then, remove the wringer from the side and the agitating blades from inside of the washer. He would fill it with a small amount of water from the kitchen sink using a little pink hose he attached to the faucet. Then John and I would get lifted into the wash tub where we would be soaped up and rinsed. After we were lifted out, dad would attach that same pink hose to a drainage port near the bottom of the tub and drain our “dirty” water out a side window. It was easier to drain the water out the window than the kitchen sink, because the window sill was much lower than the edge of the sink.

- After we grew too big for the washer, we did what the grown ups had been doing all along. When we wanted to bathe, we had to ask permission to use the landlady’s bathtub which was off the hallway just outside her apartment door. As a result, we only took baths once a week.

- Our stove/oven was fueled by kerosene. The appliance stood slightly away from the kitchen wall in order to accommodate the kerosene tank which hung behind it. Every few days, my father would go down to the dirt-floored basement to get a portable gas tank. That tank was empty and looked like something you would use today to fill a lawn mower. There was a large stationary tank in the basement that had been pre-filled

with kerosene. Dad would fill the portable tank from that larger tank, then carry it upstairs to our apartment. He would, then, fill the stove tank. However, the new kerosene in the stove had to be “primed”. That was done by making sure the cap on the stove was screwed tightly on. Then you pumped a valve to create enough pressure to get the kerosene to move where it needed to go in order to feed the flames. Dad would, then, walk the empty portable tank back down to the basement for the next resident to use.

- Thank goodness for that stove. It was our source of heat in the winter. There was a large, galvanized pipe that ran from the side of the oven up through the wall in the kitchen, through our small dining room and through the living room to finally exhaust outside near the front of the building. That was our only heat in those frigid upstate New York winters. As a result, our little stove ran almost all the time. And, believe it or not, it actually worked fairly well. The problem was that the two small bedrooms off the kitchen had no heat. There were many a night, my long suffering mother put us to bed with our snowsuits on over our pajamas.

- I was hungry a lot. But, even though we didn’t have extra funds for snacks, my mother was pretty ingenious. We had a breadbox that sat on the counter in our kitchen. It was a small metal container with a roll front where you would store your bread. The lower part was used for the keeping of the loaf in current use. But there was a small upper section in which my mother saved the ends of the loaves. The intention was to use those hard, stale ends for turkey dressing at Thanksgiving. Well, I can remember many occasions, after she put us to bed, me calling to her that “I was hungry”. She would always take one of those precious pieces of rock hard ends and give it to me to gnaw on. I loved them! To me, it was such a treat! To this day, I love stale bread.

I think that is all for now.

When I was almost seven years old, we moved from that place into an old farm house next door. This “new” house only had two heater vents for the whole house, but, at least, it had a bathroom! I suppose that’s for a future blog-thing.

Times may have been hard, but, I really want to reiterate that I never felt my life was lacking in anything. If nothing else, it was an adventure! And my parents always made do somehow. We always had presents on our birthdays and Christmas. We always had the love of our grandparents. And we always felt the assurance of a secure home. It was what it was and, as a result, I never wanted for more.

When I look at how far I have come from those spartan days, I truly am amazed. I am particularly thankful how I have been blessed with so many gifts of bounty over the years. However, even though I am incredibly comfortable in how I am living now, I feel no different than how I felt all those years ago. I guess you could say my surroundings may have altered, but I am still the person I always have been.

Gratefully, some things never change.

Thanking God for what I have always had,
A grateful kind-a guy

Shocking!

The last couple of nights here in Tucson-land have seen some very intense electrical storms. The squalls have been accompanied by a spate of rain and strong, swirling winds. However, the crazy, unending flashes of lightning have created an array of hugely dramatic scenes. These rapid fire bolts are the kind that you would see in any old horror movie such as “Frankenstein”. I half expect to hear the voice of a mad scientist crying out on the wind, “It’s alive!! It’s aliiiiive!!!”

My understanding is that cooler air from the south (of all directions), coming in from the Pacific is ramming into the dome of hot air ensconced over the Western United States. The resulting clash has resulted in some pretty exciting light shows. I call them “Mother Nature’s Fireworks”.

All this recent activity has brought to mind a couple of instances in my life where I have had my own too-close-for-comfort encounters with this sort of “flash dance”.

I remember driving from Ohio to Florida in the early Eighties. I had just finished a few weeks of rehearsal of the musical “Godspell”. We had put the show together in Ohio because that was where the production company had their home base. However, the production itself was going to be run in Tampa. Some of the actors had their cars with them. So, instead of riding on the company bus down to Tampa, I agreed to take turns helping one of the actresses make the 17 hour drive in her personal car. It turned out, one of the other actors agreed to go along with us as well. This was great because now there would be three of us to share in the driving. Thus, I found myself taking the wheel for the first leg of the trip. We had left after dinner with the intention of driving straight through, only stopping for food or gas. We figured it would be doable because each one of us could drive while the other two slept.

Well, wouldn’t you know, as lovely and pleasant as both my fellow car mates were, they also had a tendency to be kind-a flakey. As soon as we set off, they began sharing shots of vodka. After a few hours, they shared a joint. At the time, I didn’t imbibe and certainly didn’t “smoke”, so I didn’t join in on the “party”. After a few more hours, they both fell sound asleep. When it came time to the agreed hour to switch drivers, I decided it was a HECK of a lot safer to let them sleep than to have one of them drive us off the road while in an intoxicated stupor ... especially since we were approaching the mountains of Tennessee.

As I traveled along, through the very early morning hours, while my compatriots snored away, the roadway median lines began to hypnotize me into a semi-trance. I knew this was NOT good and did everything I could to keep myself awake. It was then I suddenly entered a really intense lightning storm. It happened so quickly; one moment I

was drowsing off from the monotony of a placid evening, the next moment, I was in Shakespeare's "The Tempest". The rain was coming down so hard, while the wind blew it sideways, the only thing that was keeping me on this cliff side highway was the roadside lines glowing off my headlights. The car's beams also illuminated an occasional road sign stating the elevation at which you were currently driving. The higher I went into the mountains, the more intense the storm became. I swore I was on the same altitude as the squall. Suddenly, in the midst of the flashes, a lightning bolt struck a tree at the side of the highway just as I approached. The accompanying thunder clap was deafening as the bolt traveled down the tree trunk. The hairs on my body stood on end. I wasn't sure if my response was from the electrostatic in the air or simply from pure fear. Either way, I was stunned from the experience. My adrenaline got going! I just kept driving as my cohorts snoozed away. The crash of thunder hadn't phased either one of them.

Well, at least the episode aroused me from my stupor and kept me alert enough to keep us alive through to the next morning when the other two finally woke up. They were surprised I hadn't woken them to change drivers. I was quite glad I had followed my instincts that I didn't. With the state they were in at the time, that lightning crash would have certainly sent us careening off the mountainous precipice.

The other occasion I recall happened in the mid-Nineties when my darling Danny and I were still living in Washington, DC. I had gone to choir practice at our church: MCC of Washington. At that time, we rehearsed in the church basement, next to where the music director had his office. It had started to rain when I entered the building, but being that we were in the basement after we arrived, none of us had any clue as to how the weather was progressing outside. After about a half an hour, the electricity went out. Thankfully, the Exit signs emitted enough light that we could still see enough to move around. Our choir director knew where the extra candles used for the church service were kept. After he retrieved and lit them, we continued with our rehearsal.

Just about the time we were ending, the electricity came back on. I stayed behind to help gather up the candles and put them away. During that time, most of the choir had left, so I went back upstairs by myself. When I looked out the front doors of the church, I could see the bulk of the storm had passed, but it was still drizzling. I was thankful I had my little collapsible umbrella with me. I hunkered down and hurried out the door. I was not more than ten yards out of the church, when a bolt of lightning slammed into the telephone pole just to the right of me, about fifteen feet away.

I screamed!

The force from the impact and the sound it made pushed me back another five feet or so. I wasn't sure if I jumped or if it was the displacement of the air that moved me,

but I certainly wasn't standing in the same spot I had been when the strike occurred. I knew I was lucky to be intact and that I apparently had not been hurt. But I didn't stick around to appraise my situation. I ran off to my car as fast as my little feet could carry me. I had heard lightning didn't strike twice in the same spot, but I was not about to take any chances.

There is one other time I remember experiencing the intensity of an electrical storm, but it was under entirely different circumstances.

In the early 1980's, there was one summer I was living and working in New York City when I didn't have an out of town summer acting job like most of my friends. My roommate, Leslie, had gone off to do summer stock, so I was alone in the apartment. That year, I was basically "to myself" for the entire summer. Since my birthday is in August, I wasn't expecting much of a to-do as there wasn't anyone I knew well enough to celebrate with me. The day of my birthday came and it was like any other day. I did get a card from my sister-in-law, but, it came one day late. Otherwise, I heard from no one. Even my long suffering mother forgot my birthday that year.

The day passed without a word from any of my pals. By the time late afternoon rolled around, I was feeling pretty sorry for myself. In my gloom, the phone rang. Surprisingly, it was an actress who I had worked with in an Off Off Broadway show a couple of years before. Apparently, she and one of the other actors had become an "item" and moved in with each other in Brooklyn. She was calling to see if I wanted to come over for dinner that very evening. The crazy coincidence was that they had no idea it was my birthday! Plus, they called at the very moment, I was just sitting there feeling sorry for myself. I was over-the-moon with gratitude and told them I couldn't wait to see them again!

Their apartment was near Brooklyn Heights. Brooklyn Heights borders the East River which is the waterway between Brooklyn and Manhattan. The famous Brooklyn bridge crosses the East River.

Being that my actress friend was of Philippine heritage and her boyfriend was Hispanic/African American, the meal was a delicious fusion of ethnic cuisines, beautifully created by them both.

After dinner, we decided to take a walk on The Promenade. This is a walkway that lines the East River in Brooklyn Heights. There are gorgeous brownstones on one side of the walkway and a magnificent view of the Manhattan skyline across the River. After a bit, we sat on a bench and gazed at the City. As we sat, a huge electrical storm blew up in New Jersey, which was on the opposite side of Manhattan from where we were seated. The subsequent flashes from the lightning became a spectacular light show that formed

a backdrop to the Manhattan skyline. The result was a beautifully illuminated show that offered me one of the most magical memories of a birthday I have ever had.

Sometimes the scope of nature's power can strike fear in our hearts. It may even remind us how mortal we are. However, when the circumstances are just right, we can also be reminded that "scope" is just another word for majesty. And when we encounter the phenomenon in any form, whether frightening, death-defying or awe-inspiring, we are luckier for the experience.

Watching for more,
A Lightning Bug

Electrifying!

And while I'm on the subject of electrical mishaps, need I remind you that the man-made version of electricity is just about as potent as Mother Nature's. We all may take for granted those human contrived little sockets in our homes. But abuse them in any way and the resulting commotion can be just about as dramatical as what the natural kind can offer up.

I've told you how my poor father as a teen practically done himself in by grabbing onto a high tension wire while climbing a tree with friends. To say the least, he was misguided in his thought process.

I, too, have had a couple of run-ins with the old dynamo. Not to the extent of falling out of a tree while temporarily deceased, like my father, however my encounters were still ... surprising. (I forced myself not to write "shocking".)

One Sunday, when I was a wee lad of no more than three or four years of age, I was in the fellowship hall next to my church. I don't recall why I was there without my parents, but I remember a few "older" ladies watching over a group of us toddlers while the women attempted to put together a luncheon of some kind.

The first floor of that old hall was divided into two rooms: the main banquet area where many tables were already set up to accommodate said lunch and a largish kitchen in the back. The two rooms were separated by a wall with a large "pass-thru" opening and two swinging doors on either side of the opening. For some reason, perhaps because of a lack of "help", all the women were in the kitchen while us little people were free to carouse around the tables in the main hall.

There was a child's size ironing board and toy iron set up next to the wall by one of the lunch tables. I wasn't sure why it was there. Perhaps one of my peers left it when they got bored and ran off to play with her Betsy-Wetsy doll. For some reason, I became fixated on that toy iron. I was determined to iron something while I was hanging around waiting to be fed.

The iron itself was made of some kind of flimsy metal. Dangling from it was a long braided fabric cord and a wooden plug with metal prongs attached to the end of the cord in order to make it look like the genuine article. However, I became frustrated because the metal prongs were positioned so they could not actually plug into a wall socket. Well how the heck was I supposed to iron anything if I couldn't plug the darn thing in???

After a few minutes of trying to ram the plug into the electrical socket, the noise I was raising from my efforts must have caught the attention of one of the ladies in the kitchen. After she came running out of the door, wiping her wet hands on a towel, she

saw what I was up to and scolded me for even attempting such a thing. I can remember her saying, "You could hurt yourself!"

Well, that was the WORST thing she could have said to me. Because when she flew back into the kitchen, I was now DETERMINED to plug in the stupid toy just to get back at her for reprimanding me.

(Yes, as I have written, I've always been a true rebel in my heart.)

I tried to bend the prongs with my teeth, but that just hurt. I undertook to reposition them by smashing them between my thumb and the wooden floor, but that was no good and only made my thumb bleed. I finally came up with the solution. I found a pair of scissors and, grasping one prong between the blades, used the scissors like a wrench, turning the prong to face the other one. AT LAST, I was able to get the prongs to line up with the holes in the wall socket. I achieved success!

The next thing I remember was a huge BOOM!

I found myself on the floor, about five feet from the wall with my back up against one of the legs of a lunch table with the fabric cord burnt in half and the singed plug dangling from my vibrating fingers.

Oooh, the luncheon ladies were mad at me! I wasn't sure if they were more upset that I had almost killed myself under their watch, or if it was due to the fact that I had not only blown out all the lights, I seem to have fried that particular circuit in the fuse box. Come lunch time, only half the lights were working as the congregation filed in.

Afterward, I don't remember being allowed to join in on the dining. Oh well.

Looking back on that day, at least the only thing hurt that lasted was my pride.

Another misadventure with electricity happened in 1987, when I was living in my final apartment in New York City. I had agreed to sublet an apartment from a pal of mine, named Joe, who was about to embark on a year's commitment acting in a show in Los Angeles. He didn't want to give up his New York apartment, so he struck a deal with me. Despite the apartment being on the top floor of a six floor walk-up with no elevator, it was in a great neighborhood on Manhattan's Upper West Side. The building was only three blocks from the Natural History Museum and a hop, skip and a jump from Central Park. BUT ... because it was an "illegal" sublet, I had to "lay low" and try not to attract any attention to myself, lest my friend get into trouble with the landlord. Fortunately, the Superintendent (Super) of the building was brand new to the job, so I just pretended to be my friend, Joe.

I enjoyed fixing up the apartment to reflect my tastes and my style. However, it was after I put in designer light bulbs in the living room ceiling light fixture that I got the notion to put in a dimmer switch. The goal being to create some appropriate "ambiance" in the room. Now I knew I certainly wasn't going to ask the Super to do the

job. The less contact I had with him, the longer I could prolong the ruse of being Joe. So, I told myself, “How hard could changing a light switch be?”

The first problem with the concept was that the breaker box was somewhere in the basement; which was locked. And, of course, the Super had the key. Thus, I came to the brilliant conclusion that I would forego attempting to switch off the circuit and install the dimmer while the electrical wires were still live. I never even considered the notion that it could lead to “certain death”.

Before I go any further with this tale, I just want to remind you that I am, indeed, still alive.

From past experience, I knew that as long as there was a break in the circuit of electricity, I would be fine. This meant making sure the old switch and the new dimmer were secured in the off position at all times. Also, I needed to make sure the exposed ends of the wires in the wall never EVER touched each other. If they did, the circuit would complete, electricity would flow and I would end up as a crispy critter.

I was ever so careful in my efforts. I taped anything that needed to stay off or was exposed to the air. I even wore rubber soled shoes, so that my feet would not be the source through which any stray electricity would flow.

As careful as I was, I forgot about one small thing: the door to the apartment and the doorframe surrounding the door were metal. Metal is an extremely good conductor of electricity. And the area where I was working was about an inch from the doorframe.

It was a warm day and I was wearing a tee shirt, which I thought was appropriately workman-like. Due to the temperature and the task at hand, I found myself sweating profusely. I had successfully removed the old on/off switch and was just attaching the first wire to one of the screws on the dimmer switch... when my damp forearm leaned against the metal doorframe. The result was a successful electrical flow from the wire in the wall through the screw in the dimmer switch, traveling via the screwdriver, up my arm and into the metal frame of the door.

All I can say is I didn't die, but, boy howdy, did that jolt smart!!!

After regaining my wits, I considered abandoning my project. But my misguided sense of “I've come this far” kicked in. The difficulty was, after I got shocked, my right arm and hand were completely numb! I could barely hold the screwdriver! But, silly me, I persevered. A thorough eyeballing of everything I did with immense scrutiny and, of course, great good luck, I completed the darned task. My right arm trembled for days afterward, but I felt my discomfort was certainly worth the “romantic” atmosphere I was able to achieve.

Later, after talking to Joe, he was much appreciative of my effort. Although I neglected to fill him in on the full details lest he worry I would next burn down the building with my good intentions.

My darling Danny had his own confrontation of the electrical kind.

Even though he was from a family of farmers, his dad also had an electrical repair service whose motto was “Don’t cuss. Call us”. Danny tells a story from his teenage years about a time he was helping his father re-wire an old Victorian house in St. Elmo, Illinois. Although the home had no basement, it had a crawl space underneath with a damp, dirt floor. Apparently Danny was in the crawl space connecting up some wires when, somehow, his dad thought Danny was finished and turned the electricity back on.

The next sound Danny’s dad heard was the pounding from under his feet as Danny, still holding onto the unattached wires, bounced between the floorboards and the dirt. Danny said he thinks the electrical breaker clicked off in time to stop the flow before it did any real harm.

Afterward, maybe Danny did do a little cussin’. I couldn’t say.

Danny did tell me he ended up being dazed and sore; sore from the jolt as well as being banged around. Thank goodness he wasn’t seriously injured! I’ve always thought Danny had an electrifying personality, but that was taking it too far.

But, ya know ... encounters with the “hot stuff” doesn’t always need to lead to a near death experience.

Recently, I was inspired by a neighbor who, as a thank you gift, fed a long string of Christmas lights into an empty (but clean) colored wine bottle. When the lights are plugged in, the resulting fairy-land of illumination is something to behold. As a result, I “copy-catted” her gesture. I ordered four boxes of 100 bulb string lights. Then we snagged four empty (large) bottles of wine from a friend of ours. I first soaked the labels off the bottles. Then I cut off the “female” end of the string of lights and carefully wrapped each bare wire in electrical tape. Then I screwed small wire nuts over the ends. I gingerly fed the string of lights into the bottle. (And, yes, a string of 100 lights will fit, but only if you use the 1.5 liter size bottle). I finished off the project by placing the bottle inside a glass and metal lantern. After repeating the process four times, we now have lanterns with bottles of lights at our front entrance, in the kitchen and on the back patio. At night, the subtle light they imbue makes me smile every time I see them.

So, you see, encounters with high voltage don’t always need to be the source of alarm. Sometimes electricity is able to not only inspire us to be more creative, it can exhilarate us as well. I simply think of the resulting effects as being part of the spark of life.

All fired up,
Sparky

All washed up

I admit to have doggedly written about the extreme drought conditions here in the land of the Southwest. Not only is the state of affairs ongoing, it makes for dramatical writing.

WELL!

Now that we are in monsoon season, the drama continues!

As I have told you, every year, this area gets monsoon rains that usually last from mid-June to the end of September. These rains are the life's blood to the flora and fauna around here, not to mention the beneficial replenishing of the local aquifers, as well as the local locals.

Last year, during the monsoon period, we got a meager 1.5 inches of rain. That certainly wasn't enough to do any kind of replenishing. Things remained drrrrrry. Thus, we all hoped and wished for more from this year's monsoon. But ... as you know ... "be careful what you wish for".

This past week, we got SO much rain in such a short period of time, we ended up on the ABC national news!

Soon after the beginning of July, day after day, the clouds built up over the nearby Catalina Mountains and, by mid-afternoon, the torrents were pouring down. However, there was one day where the rainfall was absolutely extraordinary. Us'n's in SaddleBrooke, just north of Tucson, received an inch and a half of rain in about a half an hour. That said, even as the rain abated over us, we could see the downpour continuing its onslaught on the slopes of the mountains.

If you will recall with me, those very same slopes were burnt to a crisp last June in a relentless fire. Because of that, much of the vegetation had been wiped out. Even though, there was some regrowth, there wasn't enough to hold the soil together. The particular intensity of that rainfall simply sloughed off the top of the dirt. As a result, the denizens downstream of the mountains found themselves up to their armholes in gushing muck, year old ash and an abundance of vegetation crashing down on them.

Thankfully, all around the Tucson area, there are dry streams and river beds we call washes. These can usually handle the normal down flows that occur during a regular monsoon rain. Most of the year, one finds one looking at them only to think, "What the heck are these dry ditches for?" There is a sign at every junction of road and wash stating, "Do not enter when flooded". When it rains, one can see why. The effluence madly courses down through these washes, effectively diverting the flow away from property. However, the ferocity of this particular storm, combined with the

conditions of the land on which the rain was pelting, caused the washes to be OVER-washed!

At the foot of the Catalinas, before the land rises up again to greet SaddleBrooke and other housing enclaves, there is a small valley running the length of the mountains. This valley became a roaring river of rolling water and debris. Everything in its path was inundated or washed away. Being that there are homes on either side of that valley, residents became trapped on the mountain side where there are no alternative outlet roads or bridges. Any one of sense would know an attempt at crossing the newly born flood was death-defying lunacy. But, of course, there is a fool in every crowd.

One local man must have been one such jester who thought his Hummer could ford this torrent.

Now a Hummer is an large vehicle that I have always associated with overly-testosteroned males who are compensating for a lack of something in their lives. Granted, the vehicle seems sturdy, but driving one through a raging, cataclysmic flood seems to me a disaster just waiting to happen.

Well this particular idiot, not only decided to drive himself through the onslaught, he thought it would be a good idea to take his TWO YOUNG DAUGHTERS with him!!! OF COURSE, they got stuck about halfway across and we're pushed about twenty yards downstream!

YES, the water was already up to their windows. YES, they had to crawl out through the sunroof onto the roof. And, YES, they had to be rescued by the authorities using a helicopter and tethers.

Come ooonnn!!! What were you thinking, man? How could you put your girls in such peril???

(A videoed image taken from the helicopter of the rescue is the one that appeared on the national news.)

This all happened barely a mile from our house. As a friend of mine wryly said, "Glad his vehicle got washed downstream after they were rescued." My friend quickly added, "I don't mean that", but we all knew what was meant.

Divine retribution.

The ranch where my darling Danny stables his horse, "Slick", was also in the path of the flood waters.

The ranch is named Spirit Dog Ranch. (A "spirit dog" is the name local indigenous peoples have for a horse.) In order to get onto the property, there is a dirt road that leads into the entrance. One direction of that dirt road leads you onto a steep hill. The other direction is on flatter ground that skirts around the hill. The entrance

itself is also a dirt roadway that takes you across a wash and into the ranch. That same wash is just downstream of where that rescue occurred.

The owner of the ranch lives on site. She took a picture that she sent to Danny showing the flooding with a warning stating, "Don't come onto the ranch! The staff will take care of the horses today". The water was so high, they had to move many of the horses away from the area onto higher ground. There weren't enough stalls to accommodate all the moved horses, so they were simply tied to the outside of the other pens.

While it was still raining, another riding friend of Danny's decided to take the dirt road over to the ranch to surmise what was happening and to see if she could cross the flooding in order to get to her horse. When she discovered it was impossible to cross the wash, she stood nearby and took video from her phone. As she was shooting, a tidal wave of mud and debris overran the already flooded wash. It decimated anything that was in the way: fences, trees and brush. The obliteration was shocking to see.

The next day, when the trouble had passed and the waters had receded, Danny and I took a drive to see what we could see.

We, first, drove on a "regular" paved road to get to the damaged area. As we got closer, we could see that this road had been completely underwater. We, then, connected onto the dirt road leading to the ranch using the flatter route. We were amazed how high the water level had come. The residue of brush, mud and black ash that had been washed down from the mountains gave us a clear view of how deep the muddy water had gotten. There were stretches of land where there was nothing but wet, black mud left behind.

When we reached the entrance to the ranch, we had enough sense not to attempt to drive across. Even though the owners had attempted to somewhat repair the road, too much of the original bank of the wash had been wiped out. We decided it would be foolhardy to try a crossing with the car; especially without having 4-wheel drive. As we forded the hardening mud on foot, I could see where property fences and posts were simply gone. As we walked onto the ranch, there was mud for at least a hundred yards beyond where the edge of the wash had been. Danny led me on a path that arced around and back toward the wash. Danny told me, "This is where a horse trail had been". We were walking on nothing but sand about thirty feet wide. I asked him if it had been lined with vegetation. He said, "yes". I wondered out loud where it had gone. Danny pointed behind me. About fifty feet away, there was a mound about twenty-five feet high of trees, branches, grass, fencing and who-knows-what else that had been pushed up by the roaring water. And that was only a small part of what was washed up. The rest had been swept away downstream. Walking a little farther, I saw eight or ten concrete slabs

broken up and tossed around. I could only imagine what sort of structure that had been. However, because of the destruction, it was impossible to tell.

Walking back to the car, we both remarked on how truly amazed we were by the power of water.

And that power is something that “giveth and taketh away”. Without the rain, life would be impossible.

Just today, Danny was riding “Slick” through the state park that adjoins the ranch and is transversed by that wash. Where there had been destruction, is now covered with beautiful, yellow wild flowers.

Here in Tucson, we covet the life-giving moisture and are so grateful when it comes. But, doled out in excess, the precipitation can equally change our world in an instant.

I suppose that is our lesson in life. Everything in moderation can be good for the soul. But, the truth of the old idiom reminds us, you can certainly have too much of a good thing.

In moderation,
Li'l Noah

When it rains ...

Tucson isn't the only place I have seen the effects of inordinate amounts of rain. My last blog-thing spurred me into thinking of occasions where I have been met with rain-caused flood waters. I am not unfamiliar with the concept of "Oh my GOSH! That's a lot of rain!!!" There have been a few times in the past when I thought to myself, "Now that rainfall is a bit excessive!" This may be an understatement with regard to the first of my encounters I want to tell you about, but I am not one to indulge in overdramatization. (cough!)

When I was just a tot in upstate New York, we had a real-live hurricane. In September of 1960, Hurricane Donna found a way out of the Atlantic Ocean and wended a path up the Hudson River valley to my home town of Schenectady. The chance of a hurricane hitting that area was a real rarity ... but there it was.

When the storm rolled across us in 1960, I had just turned 6 years old. But I remember the intensity of the weather. Our family really had nowhere to go during the onslaught, so we sat tight in our second floor apartment and watched the drama happening all around us.

The storm had weakened by the time it came that far inland, however the wind and rainfall were unprecedented. Many tornadoes were spawned all around the city. Thankfully, other than trees and branches being downed near us, we were spared the true damaging effects of the wind.

However, the rain was torrential and unending. We were lucky that we lived halfway up a long hill because all that water flowed past us like rivers. That said, the aftereffects spelled disaster for the people living at the bottom of that same hill.

A small creek (or "crick", as we called it) ran along the steep, narrow valley at the bottom of our hill. Normally, that creek never had more than a few inches of water flowing through it. Hurricane Donna's torrents filled the valley so forcefully, the houses at the bottom of the hill were completely inundated.

When the storm passed, we went down to the water's edge to see what we could see. We were stunned to see the valley filled with water and debris. Only the very top peaks of the houses' roofs were visible.

It was difficult for me to comprehend. I remember feeling both shock for what I was seeing and saddened for the folks who had lost their homes. The experience was incredible; not just seen through the eyes of a child. The adults were also overcome by viewing the onslaught. I've never forgotten the emotions brought on from experiencing the power of that deluge.

I, also, recall a day of memorable weather, in the early 1990's, when I was living in Washington, DC. I was, then, working in the box office at the famous (and infamous) Ford's Theatre. Being it was during the summer, there were no shows playing and we had abbreviated working hours. That particular day, I was only working until 5:00 pm.

Anyway, it was a typical hot, steamy summer's day and I could see storm clouds building all afternoon. By the time it was time to close up shop, it was pouring outside. I am not just talking about raining cats and dogs. The rain looked like the gods had just moved us to upstate New York and we were sitting under Niagara Falls. I had never seen anything like it. The odd thing was that there was hardly any wind. The only air movement seemed to come from the water itself displacing the air it was pushing out of the way.

The rain came in such volumes, the streets were soon flooded and the water was overtopping the curbs onto the sidewalks. This was crazy because Ford's Theatre is built on a hill. You would assume the rainwater would just flow down the incline and the walkways would stay clear. However the precipitation was coming down at such a rate, everything was soon flooded.

I and another worker stood at the doorway for quite a while, trying to figure out what to do. After about ten minutes, we both finally said "screw it!". We decided to go out into the deluge and walk to our bus stops; rain be damned! By the veracity of the way the rain was coming down, we assumed we would get soaked anyway. Being I was wearing a new pair of shoes, I took them off along with my socks and stuffed them in my backpack. I rolled my long pants up to my knees and, without even opening my umbrella, we both stepped out into the downpour. The flow of water on the sidewalk completely covered my feet. Walking barefoot through the streets of Washington, DC, while being wrapped in a curtain of water, I suddenly felt a burst of elation! We laughed hysterically as we slogged through the storm. It felt surreal and almost cleansing! The fact that we were in the middle of downtown Washington, the feeling was so unexpected and surprisingly refreshing.

I was filled with joy.

The juxtaposition of what I felt from those two events show the range of emotions that can be evoked by the rain. On one hand, the hurricane overwhelmed me with stupor and grief. On the other, on the streets of Washington, I was filled with euphoria.

Nature and all its wonder will always touch us. Remaining sensitive to its effects is what helps make us better humans. Some people only perceive the weather as a speed bump on the highway of life. But our weather is more than just a mere distraction. Being cognizant of what is happening around us can stimulate and heighten our

appreciation for our days here on Earth. I found that staying aware can make this journey through life a richer and fuller experience.

And I THINK I am a better person for it.

Mother Nature's son,
The Rainman

Lost in the woods

I have said it before and I will say it again, kids are crazy. Adolescents seem to be willing to do anything for a thrill, even if the deed means certain death for either themselves or their compatriots. If teenagers were judged by adult standards, surely they would be labeled certifiable and carted far away where they could no longer hurt themselves.

Thus it was in my formative years.

The entire time I lived in my hometown of Schenectady, NY, I hung out with the same group of friends: Gene and Jay were a year older than me; Peter was my age; and Kendall was a year younger than me. As we entered our teenage years, Kendall wasn't around as much. We would occasionally go over to his house to "analyze" the newest Beatles or Dave Clark Five album, but for the most part, he drifted away into a different group of younger friends.

By our mid-teens, our central group evolved into Gene, Jay, Peter and myself.

Being that Gene was the oldest, he was the first to attain a driver's license. When he did, our more childish pastimes of playing games or pretending we were super heroes were usurped by taking long drives in Gene's beat-up hunk of a car. After Gene got his "wheels", we all felt a true sense of freedom, which was accentuated by a good amount of teenage recklessness.

Schenectady is nestled in a natural break between the Catskill and Adirondack Mountains, created by the confluence of the Mohawk and Hudson Rivers. As a result, we were surrounded by hills and forests. There was an occasional farm or isolated house in those hills, but, for the most part, that area remained relatively untouched by development of any kind.

One of our favorite activities was to take a drive up into those hills and "get lost". The four of us would gather at Gene's house after our evening meals with our families, sit around and yak for a while before setting out on our twilight foray.

Being that we were in upstate New York, the summer offered longer days of sunlight. Often, in mid-summer, the sun wouldn't be setting until 9:00 pm. This extended daylight allowed us longer jaunts being able to see where we were going. Although, I have to say, any loss of light didn't always mean it was time to turn around and find our way back home.

On one summer drive, Gene got really ambitious and drove wa-ay up into the foothills. We seemed to go higher and farther than we ever had before. The forest got more and more dense as the trees along the narrow roads on which we were traveling

crowded the shoulders of the pavement. There was absolutely no sign of civilization anywhere; not even telephone poles.

Out of the blue, Jay suggested we stop and go for a walk in the woods. We all thought he was nuts! However, being that Jay was the “alpha” of our little clan, we all eventually acquiesced. That is, except Gene. Gene balked at the idea. He was adamant about not going on our errant adventure and said he would wait for us in the car.

He was the smart one.

My instincts were screaming at me that this was a bad idea, but I didn't want to look like I was afraid. So I slogged along behind Jay as he stepped out of the car and led Peter and I deep into the foliage. There was no path to follow, just the remote, untouched forest floor to more or less guide us.

As we struck out on our walk, the sun had not yet set. The daylight on the road was still visible between the break in the trees. However, as we ventured further into the woods, the sunlight was quickly dimmed by the density of the treetops. We kept walking but there really wasn't a lot to look at. Our view was of nothing but standing tree trunks and dead pine needles, punctuated by an occasional swath of poison ivy or stray shrubbery.

After walking for what I judged to be much too long, we coaxed Jay into turning back to the road. However, after a few minutes into our return trip, we realized we really didn't know where the road was! We tried to orient ourselves by detecting the direction of the setting sun. But the thicket of vegetation made it impossible to see anything beyond where we were standing.

It soon dawned on us we were in trouble.

We called out to Gene, but heard nothing in return. As a matter of fact, I don't remember hearing ANYTHING at all; not even the birds. All I could hear was the crunching of pine needles under our feet.

Jay kept on walking. He said he was sure he knew where he was going. But it seemed to me that we were simply wandering ... as the woods just kept getting darker and darker. I did my best not to panic. I figured I was with my friends and we were sure to find our way out of the mess we had stupidly walked our way into.

And the light dimmed.

Finally the sun was completely gone and we traveled using the sense of feel of our hands and feet.

This was NUTS!

As we groped our way through the blackness, we heard the sound of a nearby stream. Both Peter and Jay said, not too long before we stopped the car, they remembered passing over a small bridge with a stream running underneath. So, it was

decided it was best to follow the sound of that stream. The concept being that the water would lead us back to the road.

As the sound got louder, I found the ground beneath my feet slanting steeply downward. I needed to fumble for anything to hold onto in order to keep my balance.

When we finally came to the edge of the stream, we were actually able to see the remaining twilight due to a break in the trees. What lay ahead of us was a fairly wide swath of flowing water and, on the other side, another steep hill even more precipitous than the one we had just come down.

We agreed to follow the edge of the stream in order to attempt to find that bridge. The problem was we had no idea in which direction to go; had the stream been flowing upstream or downstream under the bridge? Peter was sure the terrain was such that the water was flowing downstream, so, trusting in his memory, we walked downstream.

The slog was difficult because the terrain was such that, in some places, there was no solid ground available that wasn't blocked by unyielding vegetation. We often had to walk in the water.

From having to step into the current, we realized the stream was quite deep. The two steep embankments that formed the shores of the creek continued under the water, forming a "vee" shaped stream bed.

Very soon, it was pitch dark.

I don't remember who made the suggestion, but it was decided we needed to cross the stream and climb the bluff on the other side. The idea being that we were surely close enough to the road to find it's whereabouts. I was totally skeptical at that point, but was terrified enough to try anything. My immediate concern was I didn't know how deep the water was. I've always been a short kind of fella and didn't want my brief life to end drowned on the bottom of some unnamed ditch.

We were going blindly. Jay, being the tallest, went first. He called out that the water went up to his waist. When he made it to the other side, Peter and I stumbled out together. Even though it was summertime, the water was chilly. I couldn't see anything so I just followed Jay's voice as he called out to us. It was when the water went up to my chest that I was most unhappy. But I kept going. I truly felt my life depended on it. When we all made it to the other side, we knew we still had to climb that hill. My sneakers, along with the rest of me, were soaking wet. As I climbed, I found it difficult to find traction as my wet soles simply slid on the dead pine needles and unseen brush. Somehow, with each other's help and pure desperation, we made it to the top.

With complete surprise, we were met with the glow of moonlight off the tarmac of the road.

We had made it!

After congratulating ourselves, we now had to find Gene. We were miles from anywhere and Gene was our only ticket out of this insanity. Unbelievably, after walking just a very short time, the headlights of a car approached us: it was Gene!!

The three of us piled into his car, not caring how soggy or filthy we were. Gene was too hysterically upset himself to care either!

He told us after we didn't return, he started driving up and down the road, hoping we would emerge from the woods at some other point. He said he drove and drove imagining the scenarios of having to tell our respective parents that he let us walk off to certain death in the wilds of the woods. He added, because of my mother's volatile nature, he was particularly terrified of facing her. I completely understood.

Since most of the roads we had been on were not marked, I will never know how Gene found his way back to familiar territory. Maybe he figured if he just kept driving downhill, we would eventually get to somewhere that he recognized. So, by the grace of God and the luck of the foolish, we all made it home intact, on time and in one piece. And, thankfully, our parents never found out about the utter stupidity of their teenage sons.

Looking back, to me, getting lost in that woods is just a metaphor for how I have stumbled my way through life. Sometimes by listening to bad advice, I can and have gotten myself in horrible trouble. By not following my gut feelings, the darkness descended on me and I found myself chest deep in doo-doo. However, by finding the courage to climb out of any bad situation I've put myself in, I have always found the care of a friend waiting to put me back on the road to normalcy.

Sometimes, life is like that.

Still finding my way,
A weary traveler

oooooooooo! ... aaaaaaaaaah!

Over the year or so that I have been writing this blog-thing, I generally refrain from sharing photos relating to what I am scribbling about. Unless, of course, I find that folks REALLY want to see a photographic facsimile of my subject, my general feeling has been that the images created in your minds can be much more vivid than seeing an actual picture.

That said, I HAVE to show you a couple of shots I took last night just as the sun was setting.

However, before I do, here is some background info:

Our house sits between two mountain ranges. The closer one to the east, is the Santa Catalina Mountains. A few miles farther away to the west are the Tortolita Mountains.

Now, I have recently been telling you about the monsoon season here in Tucson. The monsoon clouds dramatically build up on many an afternoon to bring much needed rains to the desert. These clouds almost always develop in the east and creep over the Santa Catalinas on their way toward the horizon in the west.

As we do most Mondays, my darling Danny and I spent some time with my poor father. The three of us had gone out to eat and then went grocery shopping at Walmart, which happens to be my dad's favorite store. Danny and I dropped dad off at his assisted living facility and were driving home when we saw the huge clouds forming as they usually have these days. We could see there already was a wall of rain pummeling an area off in the north.

After we arrived home and put our groceries away, rather than looking out our kitchen window to look at the terrain, Danny went outside to our driveway to surmise the status of the weather. It was then he called me outside to see what he was looking at. He told me to bring my iPhone in order to take a picture.

What we saw was remarkable.

For the most part, the day had been very sunny. The skies were still spectacularly clear in the west when the monsoon rains began their march over the Santa Catalina Mountains in the east. As the huge monsoon clouds were nearing our house, the sun was setting in the west behind the Tortolita Mountains, which was still basking in a cloudless sky. The result was the shadow from the Tortolitas being cast on the lower portion of the clouds while the bright orange from the setting sun shone on the upper section of the clouds.

We both took our NON-photoshopped shots.

Sometimes a picture (or two) IS worth a thousand words.

Still in awe...

...A not-so-casual observer



Waiting around ...

As I recently wrote ...

“Tuesday, I am taking my father for a stress test in order to get an all clear from a cardiologist. This is necessary in order for dad to be able to have surgery for the removal of a tumor in his ear canal that has been delayed for two months.”

So ... Tuesday has come.

As I sit here in the Imaging Services waiting room at the Veterans Administration Hospital biding my time while my poor father endures his long-awaited stress test, my mind wanders.

With my wacky medical history, I can't help but think about the various tests from my own personal arsenal. One specific procedure comes to mind.

Oy.

I am recalling the “surprise” I received upon encountering my first cystoscopy. In the past, a cystoscopy involved a doctor coaxing a hollow tube up a patient's “hoo-hah” so that a camera may be inserted through the tube in order to peer into the patient's bladder. Unfortunately, back in the late 1980's when I experienced my first procedure, medicine had yet not progressed to the reasonably comfortable methodology of today's exam.

Back then, I was still living in New York City.

As a precursor to my first cystoscopy, one morning, I awoke to find my urine being an unusual bright red hue. I immediately thought to myself, “This can't be good”. After talking to some friends, I found a urologist who could see me right away.

Everyone at his office was very professional. The waiting room was comfortable and the exam room itself was standardly pristine; almost like an operating room. After a brief once over from the doctor, he determined I should have a cystoscopy. He left the office briefly, leaving me to wonder what the heck was a cystoscopy. Soon after, a nurse came in and asked me to remove my pants and underwear. I suppose I didn't want to appear ignorant to her as to what was about to happen, so I remained silent.

Silly me.

With my privates waving not-so privately in the breeze, the nurse inserted some numbing agent into said “hoo-hah”. She, then, began unwrapping instruments from sterile paper, revealing a device looking much like a caulking gun with an extraordinarily long, straight, hollow rod.

I was beginning to get a bit ... shall we say? ... anxious.

The doctor came back into the room and positioned himself near my nether regions. As he began to insert the rod, he told me to relax and take a deep breath.

Just in case the male anatomy is not a subject of common knowledge to all of you, I want to assure you that the path from the top of the “hoo-hah” to the bladder is NOT ... I repeat, NOT ... straight. There are a couple of turns in there. However, that rod being thrust into my innards remained quite straight, forcing my internal structure to comply.

I believe I don't need to explain the resulting “discomfort” nor the animal noises coming from my lips. I'm sure you can imagine the whole situation for yourselves.

I will simply state that the doctor and/or his staff should have given me a clue as to what I was about to experience. Granted, I'm sure that exam was something they did several times a day and was old news to them. However, for the unexperienced, such as myself, the shock became ... memorable.

I survived that first experience with a resulting vague diagnosis of my having passed a “silent kidney stone” that caused the bright red color of my urine. In other words, this was a kidney stone without the usual agony. The usual EXCRUCIATING type would be destined for my future. But I assure you, on that day, the procedure was more painful than the symptoms.

Thank the gods of medicine, these days, after needing to have a cystoscopy at least twice a year, the dreaded rod is now a lovely flexible wand with the camera situated at its tip. This modern device easily goes with the flow, as it were. Except for a mild speed bump when that tube passes the prostate, the probe is quite pliable and travels relatively easily through the urethra (lovely). There even is a closed circuit monitor with which one can take in the grand view of one's viscera.

So civilized.

Anyway, back to present time ... Dad's chemically induced stress test is done. He said he feels good. I am told he did great. He even managed to trade inappropriate comments about some pretty female intern with the male radiologist.

Appallingly, his characteristic bad behavior bodes as a good sign.

Suffering through the years,
A Martyr

Yummy!

My darling Danny and I take my poor father out to eat most every Monday. Being that dad is cooped up at his assisted living facility all week, we like to have dad choose where he would like to go. Sometimes we go to eat Italian food and/or a pizza. He often likes to go to Taco Bell. Or, on occasion, his choice comes down to having a good ol' hot dog. No problem. However, he surprised us this past Monday by requesting we go eat Chinese food other than a favorite Chinese place called Panda Express. Danny and I were both happy to accommodate his request. We hadn't eaten Chinese for a while, so we were all in!

We went to a typical Chinese restaurant that had the quintessential Asian wall decorations and Sino-American music wafting through the air in order to create the appropriate atmosphere for dining on Chinese cuisine.

Anyway, after our meals were finished and the leftover food was boxed up, the waitress brought our bill with the obligatory cellophane wrapped fortune cookies placed on top of the tab. Dad had difficulty opening the wrapper, so Danny removed the plastic for him and handed the fortune cookie back to dad. My father promptly placed the whole thing in his mouth, took two chews and swallowed!

As you know, there is a little piece of paper with your "fortune" in every cookie. Dad ate his. We were so surprised, the whole thing was practically down his gullet before we had time to react.

Now, I have to give my father some slack here. He WAS recently diagnosed with some loss of his short-term memory. Apparently he had forgotten there was a slip of paper in the cookie. All we could do was hope the paper wasn't toxic and then ask the waitress for another cookie.

It's funny what we will put in our mouths without thinking too much about it.

When I was a really little fella, I had a habit of eating anything I could get my hands on. I have a vague recollection of chewing on cardboard. I also had this quirk of eating dirt whenever any of my peers asked me to indulge. I have no idea why. If anyone said, "Steven. Eat some dirt", I simply placed a handful of soil in my mouth. I didn't enjoy it. Maybe I was craving attention. The act certainly created a stir among my friends. To this day, I think my distasteful custom is the reason I am short and bald.

I will tell you, however, being married to someone who, as a means of employment, is/was immersed in the world of food safety, I have learned WAY too much about what is expected to go into our mouths. The phrase, "Ignorance is bliss" certainly applies here.

Not that our food is unsafe. As a matter of fact, the United States has one of the most protected and sanitary food processing systems in the world. There are many cases where we will not import certain items from even “advanced” countries because their procedures for how they process a food product is not up to our standards.

As I said, I have learned a LOT.

Now, even though our requirements are incredibly high, there has had to be some compromise with the food industry as to what they can “get away with” in order for them to create a product that is both safe AND affordable so they can make a profit.

Danny tells the story of when he was in college, a fast food chain was developing their breakfast meals. They found volunteers within Danny’s alma mater (University of Illinois at Champaign/Urbana) in order to detect the amount of rancidity in its new sausage patties. The idea was to see how rancid a patty could be before becoming evident to a typical consumer. Because my Danny was a grad student and was “required” to participate, he was roped into the study. He also happened to be a super-taster, with a very sensitive pallet. He could detect the smallest amount of rancidity; even better than the chemical tests. Thus, he spent almost two of his college years eating rancid meat. Yum!

Because of his contribution, the consumer can now chew on the restaurant chain’s sausage based breakfast sandwich without any harmful consequences. Danny, however, has not had one since the study ended.

Mind you, ALL animal and plant based foods begin to deteriorate in quality upon harvest. However, to help re-establish your confidence in eating all foods, your government is around to help establish just how off “off” can be. Yes, there are all sorts of ways the food industry has wiggled around in order to save money. But, as I said, these are methods, when properly followed, do not cause harm to the public.

I remember one car trip Danny and I were having with our friend Cindy. She was sitting in the back seat asking Danny questions about processing meat. At one point, Danny injected a phrase into his explanation, saying, “a component that qualifies as meat ...” and then went on with his talk. A few minutes passed before Cindy suddenly interrupted him with a squeamish laugh saying, “Wait, wait, wait, wait! A component that qualifies as meat??? What does that mean?” Danny told us that some meat products are made of ground up bone and various connective tissue that are reformed to appear as meat. The resulting commodity is protein that will not hurt you, but is not always what you think it is. In a poultry hot dog, the difference between “processed chicken breast meat” and “processed chicken” means the first would only contain breast meat while the second most likely will contain lovely proportions of ground skin and bones

along with the meat; ie: “qualifies as meat”. (For the record, Danny and I only purchase “All beef” hot dogs.)

I, also, recall when a bunch of friends met at the seashore at our mutual friend Judy’s summer rental apartment. Judy had invited a friend of hers along who we did not know, but was very pleasant company. The intent of the gathering was to have drinks at Judy’s place and then go out to dinner. Well, as it often happened, when Judy’s friend found out what Danny did as a living, she began grilling Danny about food safety. The more she learned, the more squeamish she became. Danny had to keep reassuring her that everything was safe and would not harm her. However, her anxieties became such that by the time we got to the restaurant, she wouldn’t order ANYTHING. We finally coaxed her into getting a salad, but she barely touched it.

I’m not sure she ever ate again.

I repeat ... especially in her case ... “Ignorance is bliss”.

I admire Danny for keeping our beef, poultry and pork processing safe for the forty years he worked for the USDA. He was constantly feeling the pressure from, not only the food industry, but Congress as well. There were many occasions when the powers-that-be didn’t always hold the public’s health as a priority. For the most part, Danny managed to keep things in check.

However, Danny worked for the USDA which only regulated meat and egg products. All other foods are regulated by the FDA.

You really don’t want to know the ratio of insect parts routinely allowed in your bread or cereal.

That’s something for you to chew on.

Still stuffing my face,
The galloping gourmet

Happy Birthday to ME!

Yep!

This very day, I am sixty-seven years of age! You can decide what “of age” means. All I know is I can buy liquor without getting carded (most times) and can freely watch R-rated movies; not that I am a fan of blood, violence or unapologetic sexual acts.

Being this age, I’m simply happy to take advantage of those senior discounts. (“Bargains?? Bring ‘em ON!”)

In honor of my birthday, my darling Danny is making “short” ribs. (YAY!) Being I am a person of limited stature, I found that to be somehow appropriate.

I have to tell you, though, I am so grateful ... and not just because of the short ribs. I love that I am still around to appreciate life’s largess. Every day, Danny remarks on how lucky we are ... and we TRULY are!

Honestly, when I look back on what I have endured through my life, it’s a miracle my boots are still walking around these here parts.

I had the usual childhood ailments of my generation: chicken pox, measles, rubella and the mumps. But I also endured chronic bronchitis, whooping cough and scarlet fever. When I was a tot, I had a near fatal reaction to penicillin that should have done me in. Thankfully, I managed to “stare it down”.

Also, in my early years, I nearly drowned while carelessly splashing around at a local lake. My Aunt Shirley, who was my rescuer, still recalls the roll of film that was destroyed when she dove in while still wearing her camera around her neck.

Even though I’ve managed to keep away from death’s door through all my misadventures (many about which I have already regaled you), I’ve never had the greatest luck with my health. Frankly, I’ve lived through FOUR different cancers: a brain tumor, a malignant anal cancer that metastasized to my lymph nodes, eight surgeries for skin cancer and, most recently, bladder cancer. Surgery, chemo and radiation filled many a season of my life. With one particular chemo regimen, I picked up *Clostridium difficile* (*C. difficile*) in the hospital and really almost kicked the can.

Most recently, I developed kidney problems which led to sepsis. That surprise allllmost brought me into the next realm.

But, gratefully, no.

I am STILL ticking (Danny calls that “flailing”).

He also says I’m still around because I am ornery. Maybe that’s true... however I like to think it is more my determination of not worrying about being sick that keeps me breathing. I am confident knowing no matter WHAT happens to me, I will be taken care of ... physically or spiritually. And, boy howdy, does THAT give me peace of mind.

Hey! And look at me today, I am celebrating my 67th happily and functioning quite well! I may have developed diabetes and continually have to keep an eye out for kidney stones ... but aren't I lucky to be around TO watch what I eat and endure kidney stones.

The point is to make the best of what we are given. Life is a gift. Our appreciation of that gift depends on our attitude. I know the phrase "the power of positive thinking" has been kicked around for a long time and has become a cliché. But, as I have found, positive thought leads to a positive life.

I have a loving, generous spouse. I have a comfortable home. I am able to enjoy my hobbies of gardening and sewing. Plus I have a church family that sustains me. I repeat ... I am SO fortunate.

And I enjoy my pals, like you, who bring a smile to my face every time I look back on our history, think of you or read your comments.

Happy birthday to me. Thank you for helping to make this, along with ALL my birthdays, a reason to celebrate my life. Together, we are all lucky.

At this point, Danny would now say, "Go buy a Lottery ticket".

With huge gratitude,
StevieC

Birthday postscript

As you may (or may not) know, I just celebrated my sixty-seventh birthday. Since I have had many inquiries as to what I did to observe such an auspicious day, I thought I would let you in on the revelries I experienced.

I will, first, tell you it is one of those birthdays that keeps on going and going ... Call this “the Energizer Bunny” of birthdays.

The Friday before the actual day, my darling Danny, myself and our friend Fran went to a great restaurant called Feast. The chef/owner runs the place with a “farm to table” philosophy. Depending on what supplies he can get, the menu changes every month. So the “fun” of going is never knowing what will be on the menu. The other bonus is that the chef has a knack for putting together foods or flavors you would never imagine would work together, but, in his hands, they really do! The down side is, of course, that favorite dessert you had last month is guaranteed not to be one of your choices this month.

Anyway, Fran had never been there. We weren't sure she was going to enjoy it as much as we do. We were concerned because the meal didn't start out so great. I ordered a wine that, I confess, I okayed with the waitress after I had tasted it. But after the first pour and a toast to my birthday, Fran's right eye lid twitched. Yep, I had ordered a nice rotgut. Oh well, we drank it down anyway and followed up with a good bottle of “something-or-other”. We later agreed we should have ordered the wines in reverse order. By the time we got to a second bottle, we wouldn't have CARED what it tasted like.

The food, on the other hand, was fantastic. I had a delicious sea bass with rice and oranges and Danny had char. Fran absolutely loved her mix of seafood over French toast. (I told you the food combinations are surprising). What made the evening even more special was because the chef/owner came over to our table ... TWICE! He simply wanted see if we were enjoying our evening. What a nice guy. His presence added to a wonderful meal and a lovely fete.

We, then, drove back to Fran's and capped off the evening with a small glass of chocolate wine. Now you naysayers and scoffers need to try it before you continue carrying on. The concoction is absolutely fantastic and has become a favorite of the three of us.

I left Fran's house happy and sated.

The day before my birthday, I bought a “scratch off” lottery ticket and won \$30.00! Happy birthday to me from the state of Arizona.

On my natal day, Danny gave me a bottle of Eau Sauvage cologne that I like, but had been running low on.

(True confession: I found I am sensitive or down right allergic to all deodorants, so I use cologne on my pits to keep me fresh and civilized smelling. TMI?)

Unfortunately, Danny had a Zoom meeting that very birthday evening, but he managed to take time to make short ribs (because I'm short) beforehand. He got the recipe from chef Ina Garten's television show, "The Barefoot Contessa". The ingredients included an entire bottle of burgundy wine! YIPES! But never fear, the alcohol evaporated in the cooking process, so all that was left was flavor. And WHAT flavor! Wowser, it was delicious!

Later in the day, dear friends sent two beautiful pots of flowers; a gorgeous arrangement for me AND, to our delighted surprise, a becoming tropical plant for Danny! I guess they didn't want Danny to feel left out.

And, as I say, it's the birthday that keeps giving.

There was so much short rib medley left over, we had it for dinner the next night and I had it for lunch the day after that! I ate the last two pieces of meat as my protein requirement this very morning! (A protein in the morning is a recommended dietary stipulation for diabetics ... ie: moi).

I got birthday cards from our tax guy and our investment lady. I'm not sure if I should "read" anything into receiving cards from them. I will just go with the thought that it's a nice gesture from them both and that they appreciate our business.

AND ... just as I was about to post this on Facebook, I received a box from my mother-in-law. In the box was a birthday card, a check (she REALLY didn't need to include that) and two aprons she MADE with cartoons of cows and BBQ paraphernalia all over the fabric. (Danny and I will now be "matchy, matchy").

ALSO ... Danny had ordered two retro shirts for me through a company called Royaura that haven't arrived yet. When they do come, I will have yet ANOTHER moment of celebration!

Finally, of course, I have received THOUSANDS of good wishes from all y'all on Facebook. (Well, maaaybeee "thousands" is a slight exaggeration). And I am still getting belated greetings. How wonderful and thoughtful. My heartfelt thanks to everyone for the huge smile on my face.

So this year, my birthday really IS one that keeps going and going ...!

And I don't see ANYTHING wrong with that. I think we all need to celebrate our lives ALL year 'round and not just on the anniversaries of our births. As I said before in my last blog-thing, life is a gift. Don't you think this sort of gift should be an object of jubilation every day?

So, go for it!

Only make sure the wine you get doesn't taste like an old sock.

Still living it up,

The eternal birthday boy

Weather or not

I need to apologize right up front here. I realize I have been writing an awful lot about the weather in Tucson lately. I even made a semi-serious vow to myself to refrain from any more tedious stories of monsoons and droughts.

However... I deemed that this tale ain't "tedious", so I can indulge myself just one more time. (See how I can justify ANYTHING?)

I am all a twitter (that is "twitter" with a small "t") to tell you what happened early yesterday evening.

As I have told all y'all, most every Monday, my darling Danny and I make a visit to see my poor father and take him out to dinner, followed by a trip to Walmart, which is his favorite store. This is when we also do our grocery shopping for the week and buy dad whatever supplies he may need.

For dinner, dad was feeling like pizza, so we drove to a great place we know about 15 minutes from where dad lives. While driving, we all took note of the dark monsoon clouds that were gathering over the mountains to our east.

At the restaurant, we were seated at a booth so that I was facing the view to the outside. As the meal went on, looking past my father through the windows, I could see the skies getting darker and darker. By the time we left, there were isolated pockets of lightning storms with heavy rain just to the north and west of us. This was all happening while we were still experiencing relatively bright sunshine. However, driving to Walmart a few minutes away, ominous clouds were soon above our heads. But since it had not yet rained at Walmart, we remained dry as we walked into the store.

Even when we were through and loaded up the car with our groceries, it still was not raining. As we drove back to dad's assisted living facility, it only sprinkled just a little. But, not too far in the distance, we could see that the pockets of lightning storms and profound rain had intensified. As a matter of fact, we seemed to be surrounded by these threatening elements.

Be that as it may, it was barely drizzling when I unlocked the gate at dad's facility and walked him into his building.

When Danny and I left the assisted living campus to make our half hour trip home, the vista around us was foreboding. In front of us, to the north, we could see three rain cells with lightning flashing between the heavens and the Earth almost every minute. The rain was so dense ahead, we couldn't see through it at all. On our left, to the west, the horizon was black, completely obliterating the light from that evening's sunset. Yet, surprisingly, we remained in a very light sprinkle of rain.

As we approached the tumult to the north, the rain picked up just a bit, but only in occasional waves. However, there were times it didn't rain at all. All the while, we could see the maelstrom deepening all around us. I felt as if we were driving through a corridor, much like walking through a dark hallway in a haunted house; nothing affecting us, yet anticipating the unknown.

We turned right to head east toward the mountains. I could see rain on the mountain range and felt sure we were finally going to get inundated by the torrents. But, no. It only continued to lightly drizzle on the car. Danny barely needed to utilize the intermittent wiper speed to clear the windshield.

By the time we turned left to, once again, go north, we were not only surrounded by the oppressive gloom from the rain clouds, the lightning up ahead was turning into a strobe effect. Yet we STILL drove along in an extremely light shower with patches of no rain at all!

When we entered the small town of Catalina, just south of where we live, Danny noticed the lights were out. They had no electricity. We soon grew to know why.

Up ahead, we saw the flashing lights of several police cars. They were sitting at the side of the road next to where a utility pole was laying on its side. Thankfully, the pole was not blocking traffic but had fallen away from the road. I just assumed it had been hit by some vehicle. However, as we drove on, we saw the next pole was down, then the next, then the next! I counted ten poles on their sides. The odd thing was we didn't observe any stretched or broken wires nor any associated flashes of electricity. They all were simply "down". I, then, noticed there were fences also laying prone on the ground, along with several snapped trees.

"What happened here?"

We could only guess that in the approach of the many storm cells, there must have been a "micro blast" of wind strong enough to take down ten utility poles. This certainly would need the strength of hurricane force winds to do such a thing! We were so lucky we had not been driving up that road just a few minutes before! Holy Moly! I breathed a sigh of relief.

And STILL we continued to drive in only a light drizzle!

When we turned right onto the road leading to our housing development, we were shocked to see the roads were completely dry. It had not rained there AT ALL! Yet, looking into the rear view mirror, I could still see the cacophony of rain and light emanating from the surrounding storms we had driven through.

We pulled into our garage high and dry with no sign of having driven through any turbulence.

When I looked at our rain gauge this morning, we still had not received a drop of moisture. On the other hand, Danny had to delay his visit to see his horse because the “dry wash” in front of the entrance of the ranch where his horse is stabled was flowing with rainwater so deeply and quickly, the road into the ranch was washed out!

The whole experience felt odd to me. For all intents and purposes, we should or could have been inundated and washed away at any moment. But we simply ended up with what amounted to a benign outing.

What force allowed us safe passage through the chaos? Why did we never directly encounter, as my Danny likes to say, “death and destruction”? Somehow a large protective umbrella seemed to be held over us as we found our way home.

Guardian Angel? Stroke of luck? Wild coincidence? I will let you speculate on the metaphysical nature of the encounter, if you deem there was any at all in the first place.

In my own heart, I know we were being looked after.

Had we, unknowingly, been led into a life lesson? I see this experience as an exercise to prompt myself to not be afraid; that I will always be taken care of. As I have written in the past, a truth I carry with me is “Don’t worry”, no matter what happens. Of late, for me, life has been a little off-kilter, with my father’s health and a some other personal concerns. I think this adventure was simply a hint from above to remind me that there is never a need to fret.

Oh! And because we had the good fortune of not becoming a statistic, Danny, once again, uttered his credo, “Go buy a Lottery ticket”!

Still slogging through life’s storms,
The Rain Man

What's in a name?

As far back as I can remember, I have been aware of many family members and friends not being known by their first names. Nicknames or other sobriquets have seemed to have been the norm for my intimates.

For example, looking at the maternal side of my poor father's family, almost none of the women went by their given first names. His own mother's name was Mary, but was always known as Mae. Her sisters Elvira, Theresa, Edith and Francis were called Vera, Tess, Edie and Minnie. I have no idea where the moniker of "Minnie" came from. That entire family was short in stature, so, other than "calling the kettle black", there would be no reason to mock her height. Maybe it was because she was the youngest female. I never knew where the name came from. Auntie Minnie was simply what she was called.

(As a sidebar, Minnie was Regis Philbin's mother. I know, I know ... I drearily haul that fact out every so often. But, as tiresome as this historic tidbit is, not everyone is up to date on the Cupo family tree.)

My father had a cousin who was also named Elvira, but everyone knew her as Googs. I asked my dad why that was, but he was clueless.

On my mother's side of the family, two of my aunts were given the name Leocadia at birth. Now Leocadia is Greek in origin, but that branch of the family tree was Polish. So WHO KNOWS where that link comes from. As you can imagine, neither auntie stuck with that name. My Great Aunt Leocadia went by Louise and my mother's sister, Leocadia, went so far as to legally change her name to Lee. I still can't help but think the name, Leocadia, rolls off the tongue and is quite musical sounding. "Leocadia. Leocadia. Wherefore art thou, Leocadia?"

Two of my best friends in my neighborhood completely ignored their first names growing up. To this day, they only answer to their middle names. One is Stanley Jay, who we only know as Jay and the other is Hans-Peter who is Peter. I definitely prefer "Jay" over "Stanley". But "Hans-Peter" has an undeniable international cache, don't you think? "Hans-Peter, man of mystery".

I have to include myself in this group of not always being called by my given name. Although, except in one case (which I will get to later), I had nothing to do with these epithets.

My mother happily dubbed me Sunshine. My maternal grandmother lovingly called me Teebee (akin to "Stevie").

As a matter of fact, these days, most of my closest friends still refer to me as Stevie. I realize that name may seem uncharacteristic for a 67 year old man, but I like it. The tag seems fitting for my personality.

When I was in high school, my theatre teacher was the first to begin to call me by my last name: Cupo. I pronounce the name as if one were saying "Cupid" or "cupie doll". He, like many people however, said "Coopo". Well, over time "Coopo" turned into "Poopo", which evolved into "Poop". (Lovely). There are still a few of my drama-rama friends from high school who call me Poop. What can I say? It's a name of affection.

In college, everyone referred to me as Cupo; either the "Coo" or "Cue" pronunciation. It didn't matter to me which they used.

However, when I got to New York City in 1977, the way one said my name became important to me because, as an actor, it was my professional name. Well, every audition I went to, the monitor overseeing who went into the audition room inevitably said my last name incorrectly: "cup-o" being a favorite.

After I achieved my actor's union card, I had what I thought was a bright idea. In the bylaws of the Actors' Equity Association union, you are allowed to change your professional name once for free. I decided to alter my name to Steven Q. Poe, thinking that would be a sure way to hear my name pronounced as I thought it should be said. After the name change happened, I eagerly went to my first audition. I gladly signed the sign-up sheet and proudly presented my new Equity card with the revised spelling. The time came when it was my turn to go into the audition room. The monitor called my name:

"Steven Poe?!"

"WHAT???"

"Steven Poe!!"

He had completely left off the "Q"!

I hung my head and shuffled into the room. I didn't get the job.

But, thinking to myself that was only one guy, I brushed off my bruised ego and went to my next audition.

"Steven Poe?!"

"ARRRRGH!!!"

You know what? No one ever said "Steven Q. Poe" ... EVER!

I paid the bucks to change my name back. But there still are people out there that love to call me "Mr. Poe".

I deserve it.

These days, my darling Danny and I have pet names for each other. I call him Gan or Ganny ... or sometimes just Gn. He occasionally will call me Garbanzo because he thinks of me as a little jumping bean.

Whatever I am referred to as these days, I know it is out of affection or good humor. I am happy to receive any appellation, especially when it comes from my loved ones. I don't care if a stranger completely mutilates my last name. I find it funny. I will help any stranger with the pronunciation, if I see it matters to them. Otherwise, I let it pass. No big deal.

After all, a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet.

Sweetly yours,

Mr. Garbanzo nee Poop

It's only a number

As I have been amazed at how my nonagenarian father has been recovering so well and so quickly from his recent surgery, I have been aware of some other amazing folks from “the greatest generation” that have recently been in the news.

The most famous of this group is Clint Eastwood. Mr. Eastwood's latest movie, “Cry Macho” was just released a few weeks ago. As in many of his cinematic endeavors over recent decades, he directed and acted in this film. Directing a film takes an incredible amount of energy, stamina and concentration. Acting in a film requires bouts of intense focus, not to mention the memorization of dialogue and an emotional vitality needed to bring a scene to life. Clint Eastwood is 91 years old! How did he have the endurance to do such a deed at his age? I don't have that kind of energy at 67! Amazing.

Then there is the not-as-famous, but well-known among her peers, Betty Reid Soskin. Ms. Soskin is the oldest national park ranger in the country, having just turned 100 years old! Even though she now uses a wheelchair, she continues to work as a park guide at the Rosie the Riveter WWII Home Front National Historical Park in Richmond, California. Her job has her explaining the contributions made during the war by women and African Americans. I think a park needs to be named in her honor to explain the contributions she has made to the Park Service! Wow!

Recently, I was tickled and amazed to hear on NPR of centenarian, Virginia Oliver, who, at 101 years old, has been a lobster fisherwoman since she was a child. According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, lobstering has the highest number of fatalities in the fishing industry because of “the gear used, fatigue and environmental conditions”. Mrs. Oliver continues to work on the seas off the coast of Maine with her 78 year old son, Max, three days a week from May to November. When her doctor told her she didn't need to keep at the laborious job, she simply said, “I like doing it”. Most recently, she was quoted by the AP news service saying, “I've done it all my life, so I might as well keep doing it”.

And THAT'S what you call New England stick-to-it-tive-ness!

Notwithstanding the advanced ages of these folks, they have not only persevered, they have thrived! I suppose the “luck of the draw” of good health, a loving support group and just a whole lot of gumption help these people get to where they are today.

But I have to say, extreme longevity in of itself is reason enough for recognition and celebration.

My darling Danny had a great aunt (Aunt Dora) who lived almost to 108, passing three months before her birthday. And when she passed, she was not in a nursing

facility, but was living at home, sitting in her favorite chair, knitting. Now that is the way to go!

To show what kind of woman Dora was, on her 100th birthday, she was staying with her son in California. When the city elders found out they had a centenarian in their midst, they contacted her and asked her what she wanted to do in order to celebrate the occasion. She told them she wanted to go up in a hot air balloon! And she did!!

Again ... gumption.

Danny just found out about the oldest living WWII veteran. His name is Lawrence Brooks. He is living happily and healthily in New Orleans. Mr. Brooks is 112 years old! He credits his long life to "liking people".

My dad is a WWII vet and will be turning 95 in November. He also keeps on going and going and going. Danny and I were joking that, at the rate dad is progressing, he will beat Mr. Brooks' record in only 17 years!

I had better start making arrangements in advance for that auspicious occasion because, by then, the rest of us will be pushing up daisies.

Still here for now,
Son of the Energizer Bunny