

The Best OF AGING

TIME WELL SPENT

Travel On The
Road Not Taken
With Drs. Joan
And Will Weber

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MY DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY

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ABOUT THE COVER: The remote Taktsang or Tiger's Nest Monastery near Paro, Bhutan, is one of hundreds of Buddhist fortress sanctuaries throughout the country."

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From the Publisher

Welcome to *The Best of Aging*. Without question, we are blessed with the most amazing people in southeast Michigan. I continue to be impressed with the topics of people, places, and organizations that are presented to us each and every day.

Over the past few weeks I have been thinking about the importance of our parents and grandparents, especially when it comes to being a positive influence on our children as well as on us individually as we mature. In 2003, my wife and I had the opportunity presented to us to have her mother come live with us. It was a very difficult decision, as it would have meant a complete disruption of our routine as a family. More importantly, we didn't know if we were even capable of caring for an aging parent that had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

Prior to making the decision, we talked with a lot of people including friends and siblings. I also reflected on my own personal experience. Both of my parents had passed away at an early age, so I had a built-in yearning for having my kids experience grandparents firsthand. For many years, I made a conscious effort every month or two to travel across the state to bring my two very young kids (my son was 2-1/2 years old and my daughter was just six months old when I first began) to stay with my grandparents for the weekend while my wife worked. It was a very important connection for me to have and it really allowed my son and daughter to live in a home (if only for a night or two) with two very wonderful and mature people that had a wisdom about them that only comes from living a full life. By 2000, both of my grandparents had passed away and I was now the eldest generation on my side of the family.

So we made the decision to bring my wife's mother into our home. My son was eleven and my daughter was nine. Yes it was difficult. As the months went by, we began to look for solutions to problems that would inevitably arise. In fact, my wife and I soon began to think of them as challenges instead of problems – the kind you'd find in a game show or dinner mystery. I remember 'competing' daily with my wife on who could get her mother to smile or laugh or sing first. This was the age of iPods and music of any type of genre that could be downloaded in an instant. I discovered Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Herb Alpert, and all of the dozens and dozens of artists that her mother had loved and grown up with.

Unconsciously, my wife and I wanted to provide a living, breathing example to our children of an act of sacrifice, responsibility and courage. To sit on the sidelines and let someone suffer was not the people we wanted to be. I see examples in my children and the children of others who have learned these lessons. They tend to be grounded, caring, and responsible people who can communicate effectively with people of all age groups.

I believe that acting responsibly is contagious. My wife and I caught this 'contagion' from her older sister and her husband for the many years of sacrifice they had given to her mother. After nearly two years of my wife's mother living with us, the detrimental effects of Alzheimer's caught up with us all and required us to relocate her into a wonderful facility where she could be cared for 24/7 in Kentucky. My wife's younger sister and her family, who live near the facility, visit and comfort her nearly every day. I am proud and thankful that there are people like them in the world.

I hope you enjoy and achieve *The Best of Aging* in your life.

Jeff Collison

Publisher, The Best of Aging

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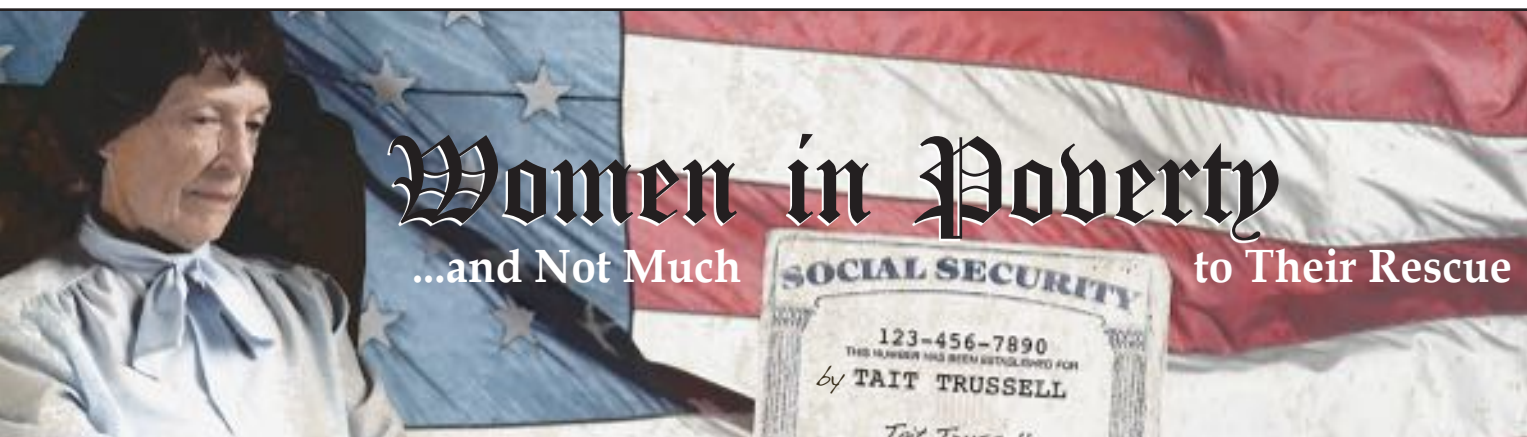
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Women in Poverty

...and Not Much to Their Rescue

An astounding 50 percent of women over age 65 would be living in poverty -- if it weren't for Social Security. Obviously, for millions of older women, Social Security is a lifeline. Even with Social Security in place, 12 percent of women over 65 struggles along in poverty.

These data come from the most recent installment of the Public Policy & Aging Research Brief series from the National Academy on an Aging Society. That's the policy branch of the Gerontological Society of America (GSA).

Social Security is currently in the public policy spotlight. Surely it will be a major topic for the new Congress. Can Social Security be put on a sound footing? That's an important question to all seniors, particularly older women.

There are at least three reasons for concern about Social Security benefits in the years ahead, according to Virginia P. Reno, vice president of the National Academy of Social Insurance (NASI). First, benefits are modest — about \$14,000 a year on average. Two out of three retirees depend on Social Security for more than half of their income. A second concern is that benefits have already been cut by raising the eligibility age for full retirement benefits for most baby boomers, and by deducting ever-rising Medicare premiums from our benefit checks. Third, other retirement resources, such as pensions, home values, and personal savings are less adequate.

One NASI recommendation for improvement is to raise the special minimum benefit for long service, low-paid workers to a higher level by paying 125 percent of the federal poverty level to a retiree with

30 years of work. Another, more controversial, idea would be to boost the cap on taxable wages. It is now \$106,800.

Another proposal is to treat all salary reduction plans like 401(k)s. In 1983, Congress made workers' contributions to employer-sponsored 401(k)s subject to FICA (payroll tax). Applying the same idea to such plans as salary set-asides for medical spending and dependent care would add to revenues to pay future Social Security benefits. Still another proposal is to increase the payroll tax from 6.2 percent to a higher level, to take effect some years in the future.

Joan Entmacher, vice president of the Nation Women's Law Center, recommends an alternative benefit for widowed spouses based on the combined benefits of both spouses. That could provide more income than the present system when household benefits decrease at widowhood by 33 to 50 percent because the widow gets only a portion of her husband's Social Security amount.

Legislators need to be aware of the impact on Social Security from the recent tax deal that not only preserved the current tax levels but also cut the payroll tax for one year. This means less money going into the Social Security Trust Fund.

The national debt is probably the most worrisome factor for Social Security. By 2020, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) says our debt could be well over \$20 trillion, compared to \$3.6 trillion a decade ago. The new Congress is expected to focus on cutting spending. That means going after Social Security and Medicare. These two programs alone account for a third of our entire budget.

We need to think about the potential return of inflation, which will wear away your purchasing power. Commodity prices tend to be "the first signals of possible future inflation," The Economist magazine commented last month...." In past inflationary episodes

commodity prices always rose first as they are dominated by existing stocks which have inelastic supplies."

A worrisome factor is the increasing demand for many commodities by the fast-growing, emerging countries in Asia and Latin America. "I expect what is driving most of the current run up in commodity prices," wrote Michael Bordo, Rutgers University professor of economics "is the U.S.'s expansionary monetary policy and fears of global inflation in the future."

The Wall Street Journal recently reported: "Across corporate America, more companies are wrestling with when and how much to raise prices as raw materials costs climb." The increases pose problems as consumers resist increases. General Mills said it would increase prices on a quarter of its breakfast cereals "as a result of rising grain and other commodity prices." General Mills is certainly not alone. Domino's Pizza said cheese prices are up 29 percent and headed higher, according to the pizza chain's finance chief. Wheat was 34 percent higher in September than the year before. Corn also was up 34 percent. Milk was 32 percent higher.

Several economists in an open letter to Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke urged him to discontinue the second round of so-called quantitative easing (QE2) – in effect, printing money. As one of the signers, Kevin Hassett, director of economic policy at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), said, "There's the possibility that the Fed will have a hard time withdrawing the stimulus when inflation increases."

The government standard for measuring inflation is the Consumer Price Index for urban consumers. Over the past year, it has increased only 1.2 percent. But that's the so-called "core" figure. It excludes food and energy. Also, it queries only 87 percent of the urban areas, about 4,000 households and about 25,000 retail establishments, filling stations, supermarkets, and hospitals. But gasoline has gone up (November 2009 to November 2010) 9.5 percent, fuel oil, 14.5 percent, used cars 8.6 percent, medical care 3.6 percent. So, the CPI is really an incomplete gauge of inflation.

When prices already are flying up higher than the wages or salaries of most Americans, folks are beginning to wise up and worry more about their meager Social Security checks.

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IS IT TIME FOR A MEDICATION CHECK-UP WITH YOUR PHARMACIST

BY Michelle Fox, Pharm.D.
Candidate 2011, University of Michigan
Tami Remington, Pharm.D.,
Clinical Pharmacist, University of Michigan Geriatrics Center Clinics

Medications are powerful tools that can help people with chronic medical problems to live better lives. As we age, many of us encounter long-term health problems that can be treated with medications. As the number of health problems grows, so can the number of medications prescribed. Over time, some older adults may take 10 or more medications each day.

Many people are unhappy with the number of medications they take. This can be due to concerns about medication costs, difficulty managing so many medications, or concerns about possible side effects or drug interactions. Some people wonder if the medicines are working, if they really are improving their health. Others just don't like the idea of having to rely on medications. And, when people are not confident in their medications, they often do not take them regularly and so may not get the intended benefits.

A medication check-up can help address these concerns. So, what exactly does a medication check up involve? It is a chance for your doctor or pharmacist

to dedicate time to reviewing your medicines with you. Specifically, the following questions can be answered:

- 1 Is this combination of medicines the best for the conditions I have?**
- 2 Are all of these medicines still needed? Can any be stopped?**
- 3 Could any of these medicines be causing some problems I am having?**
- 4 Are there any worrisome drug interactions at play?**
- 5 Is this combination the most cost-efficient?**

How do you know if it is time for you or a loved one to get a medication check up? Any time that you feel it would be helpful for you is a good time to ask your doctor or pharmacist to review your medications!

Some key signs that it may be time for a medication check up include:

- ✓ taking 5 or more medications every day
- ✓ concern that you may be having medication side effects
- ✓ having recent medication changes
- ✓ concerns about taking so many medications, or confusion about how to best take them
- ✓ trouble paying for medications

The best way to get a medication check up is to make an appointment with your pharmacist or doctor. Tell them the reason for the appointment is to have a complete medication review. At the appointment, bring all your medication bottles and a list of questions or concerns that you have. Make sure you tell your pharmacist or doctor about prescription, over-the-counter and dietary supplements (vitamins and herbal products) you take. Also include medications you take sometimes for occasional symptoms.

Having a medication check-up periodically can help you and your doctors ensure your medication regimen continues to be the best for you. Understanding your treatments can give you the confidence needed to take them regularly so you get the most benefit from the medicines you take.

FYI For more information on the services available at the University of Michigan Geriatric Center please visit: <http://www.med.umich.edu/geriatrics/>

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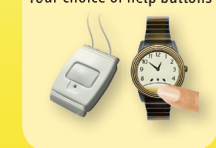
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Did You Used to Be Perfect?

By Neil Wyrick

I used to be perfect but I gave it up. It made people nervous. I have to be careful to whom I say these words for some people don't have a sense of humor. In short, none of us is perfect and neither is our mate, but that does not mean that we cannot learn a few lessons for improvement and put them into practice.

This is the month of Valentine moments; here are some little things to do to stretch the meaning beyond one day only.

- **PRAISE EACH OTHER.** Such as that old standby "Man/woman doesn't live by bread alone. He also needs buttering up." So why not do that; get in the habit of praise rather than complaint -- even a weak grin is better than an ongoing frown. "Thank you" said the husband, and the wife replied, "Thank you." Each knew what they were saying thank you for. They had agreed that all they had to say were these two words and it would mean there was a long list in their minds of all the good and loving things each had done for the other. So rather than name them, they both agreed the list was long; they just said "Thank you." It brought out smiles each time they said it so they did it quite often.
- **ENCOURAGEMENT** is a magic word anywhere in the adventure called living but it is a giant when applied to the marriage relationship. "I believe in you," when it is said in the many

ways it can be said, gives the recipient wings. I never met a husband or wife who complained their mate encouraged them too much.

- **SPEND TIME WITH EACH OTHER!** "Elementary my dear Watson," you reply, but unfortunately it isn't elementary to a host of couples. So, as they spend less and less time with each other -- and thereby have less in common so they are prone to spend less and less time with each other. It is a merry-go-round that isn't very merry. The tornado hit with a terrible ferocity. It picked up the bed with the couple in it and flew them several hundred feet to land at the entrance of a nearby diner. The wife began to weep and the husband leaned over and said, "Don't be scared. Don't cry. We're not hurt." "I'm not scared," she answered, "I'm just happy because this is the first time we've been out in over 14 years."
- **BE KIND ONE TO THE OTHER.** In all my years of counseling I have never gotten used to how some mates berate and belittle each other in public. And then expect each other -- especially since they are now so emotionally bloodied and bleeding -- to feel any affection. So yes, call each other "darling" or "love" or some other endearment if you want the object of the words to act like a darling or love. If you abuse and misuse each other you are investing in trouble and it will pay a host of improper dividends.
So, Happy Valentine's Day and may you make it so by how you treat each other.

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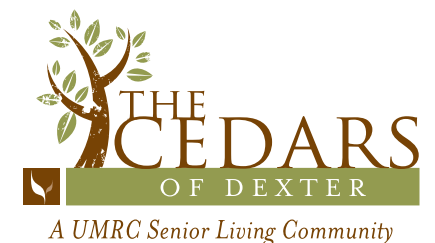
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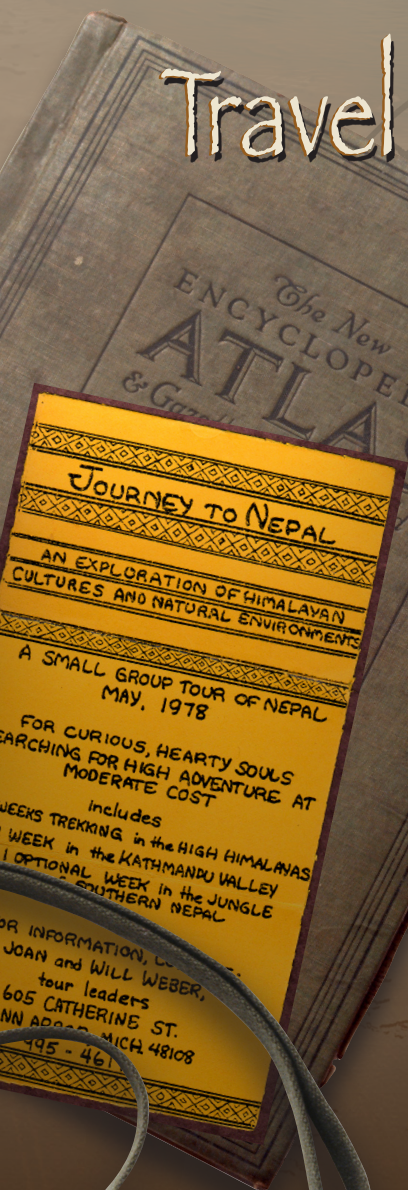


TIME WELL SPENT

Travel on

The Road Not Taken

with Drs. Joan and Will Weber



BY LEE THORSEN

In Robert Frost's classic poem The Road Not Taken, popular interpretation holds that this traveler inspired us all by saying, "I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference." Drs. Joan and Will Weber have spent their entire career making a difference in how we think about travel and were one of the very first ecotourism agencies in the nation, long before ecotourism had a name. They are worthy of this edition's Time Well Spent profile. If you know of a person or group that has a fascinating story to tell, please let us know.

Sitting in the conference room of Journeys International, I am struck by the dozens of framed photographs of exotic places you'd normally find in a National Geographic magazine. Places like Nepal showing the Himalayas in the background to a Maasai village in Kenya. The two people sitting across from me, Drs. Joan and Will Weber, are some of the warmest and friendliest people you'd ever want to meet. Sure, they have aged over the 33 years of travel from the pictures on the wall, but they still have the same passion and enthusiasm when they start talking about their life as founders of Journeys International.



Trekkers pause to admire the Annapurna Himalaya from near Mustang in Nepal.

The Early Days

Will joined the Peace Corps in the early 70's after he received his undergraduate degree at the University of Wisconsin. Will was in Nepal for a little over three years as a teacher and worked for the national parks office. During his last year, Joan joined him. The Peace Corps traces its roots to 1960, when Senator John F. Kennedy challenged students at the University of Michigan to serve their country in the cause of peace by living and working in developing countries. "I was happy to go to places where no one had been before and be the first volunteer. I didn't care how far out it was," said Will.

"People were always asking me about the things in my life back home. They heard rumors of all sorts of magical things that we have back here." Will went on to say, "I came back for a break and returned to Nepal with a Sears catalog and I was really sorry I did that. In a sense it opened up too much awe and envy and a certain level of discontent. Yet, I concluded that nothing in that catalog would make those people happy. It might be



Joan on the Flores Sea in Indonesia

shinier, brighter or louder, but it wasn't going to make them happy. What I took away was that happiness itself isn't generated from material objects; it comes from satisfying relationships and an understanding of your circumstance."

"It gave me a real empathy for what people go through. They have a tough life." Will continued, "There's a certain notion of romanticizing the idea of self-sufficiency. Living in a beautiful mountain community, growing all of your food and not relying on the outside world. In fact, you don't need an outside world until you realize all of the things that we socially take for granted; medication, healthcare, and plumbing – all those things are really nice to have. Even though Nepal is a poor country, the people tend to be very generous and often express great joy."

Joan and Will finished up their service and came back to Ann Arbor and got married. Both of them entered graduate school at the University of Michigan. School of Natural Resources for Will while Joan entered into a combined Psychology and Education program. They had the traditional notions that they would become respected professionals in academic or business circles. "Some friends of ours approached us after they had researched a trip to Nepal," Joan explains, "They found it was very expensive. We knew that we could help them and if we got enough people to pay a portion of our fare, then we could go back ourselves."

Journeys International Begins

In 1978, they sat in their student apartment and typed up a one-page flyer inviting "curious, hearty souls" to join us on a "Journey to Nepal." Eight people responded and the ten of them soon arrived in Nepal. "It was a bold step to arrive with all of these people and think that we had a plan," said Joan. "The people that we had contacted to set things up for us in Nepal didn't come through for us. So we ended up having to pull together tents, food, cooking equipment and staff for our trek that started the next day."

Will noticed Pemba Tsering Sherpa, a local Nepalese man, while Pemba was telling his story to a group of people. Pemba, a highly regarded



Will visits the baby elephant nursery at the Chitwan National park in Nepal.

elite mountaineer, was telling the group that he recently made a decision to not climb anymore as a result of a near-death experience when he was caught in an avalanche while on an expedition. "I thought to myself that this is not the guy; he's been through too much. He can't leave tomorrow on a trek with us," said Will. "I chatted with him afterwards and he was surprised that I spoke Nepali as he didn't speak any English. He knew that was an obstacle to him being a leader of an English-speaking trek. I told him not to worry about that and that I'll do the translating if you do the organizing. Starting out, he had the ability to bring people along with an idea by force of his personality. In fact, he brought us along with the idea of a second trip."



Pemba Tsering Sherpa of Nepal

"We had many evenings around the campfire to talk. Part way through the trip we started to realize that we enjoyed working together and we started to fantasize that maybe we could do this again. Maybe we could start a business," explained Joan, "At the end of the 25 days, we had hatched a plan. Even though we all had different personalities and backgrounds, all of us shared a quality of not being afraid to act on an idea."

To the surprise of Will, Joan and Pemba, everybody enjoyed the cultural intimacy of sleeping in local homes and eating local foods. They learned an awful lot about what they can ask travelers to do in a strange culture and what they needed to provide them to make sure that they have the psychological experience that they were seeking.

Joan reveals, "Part of it was, yes we can make things happen and the other part was that we didn't need to see the entire path laid out before we took the first



Will in a Maasai village in Kenya.

steps. We didn't know that this would be our livelihood until the time that we would retire. We didn't know that it would support our family. All we wanted to do was to do it again, and again, and to learn the next destination and find another 'Pemba' in each new country."

Ecotourism Is Born

At the time, Will was taking courses for his master's degree and one of the projects that he did was, "How could tourism become a force for conservation?" This was the idea that defines ecotourism today. Will said, "It isn't that often, I guess, that you take a term paper and turn it into a lifelong profession."

Will and Joan were not interested in having their own employee in a foreign country or spending a lot of time living there. It had to be a person that had enough together to be able to run the operation without their presence. That was another concept that was different. Will explains, "Today, most tours will have an American accompanying them. We are trying to create self-sufficiency in the destination where local people ran the show. That's another tenet of ecotourism – the money all gets distributed locally to local people."

They were one of the very first, if not the first, ecotourism companies out there. "We were watching tourism have a detrimental impact. Ourselves being young and having been in the Peace Corps, we would see tourists come and expect white tablecloths, fine china, and all kinds of imported food at the dinner table. It made a lot of sense to question those assumptions." Joan continues, "Especially when the locals define hospitality quite differently. Not with tablecloths and china, but with the kind of service and generosity that is locally defined. We should not come with our own definition of what generosity and hospitality is; we should come with an open mind of how the local people are defining it. We should not go on trips to teach the local people; we should go to learn from them. We shouldn't be taking work from the local people; we should be providing work for them."

Today

In 2009, Pemba Tsering Sherpa died in Kathmandu, Nepal of liver cancer. "He was our dear friend and our inspiration. During the more than thirty years of our partnership, he opened his home and his heart to many hundreds of travelers," said the Webers. Pemba's son, Nawang Sherpa, continues the Nepal-based business into the next generation.

"Today our clients celebrate their age because they have the means now," said Will, "They've done well with their financial decisions to where now there are really no obligations other than what they want to do with the rest of their lives." Joan went on to say, "Our trips are not to test how much discomfort you can tolerate. The idea is that you should sleep really comfortably and you should eat really well. But, during the day you should be as physically and intellectually active as you want to be."

namaste



"Today one of the most profound benefits of travel is that you go to another culture as an observer, and you can see that there are all kinds of different ways to be a successful human being.

If you have enough opportunities to look at others being successful as a culture, family and individual, you learn a lot about all the possible variations outside of your own life."

– Drs. Joan and Will Weber



Will and Joan on a recent trip to the Isle of Skye in northern Scotland

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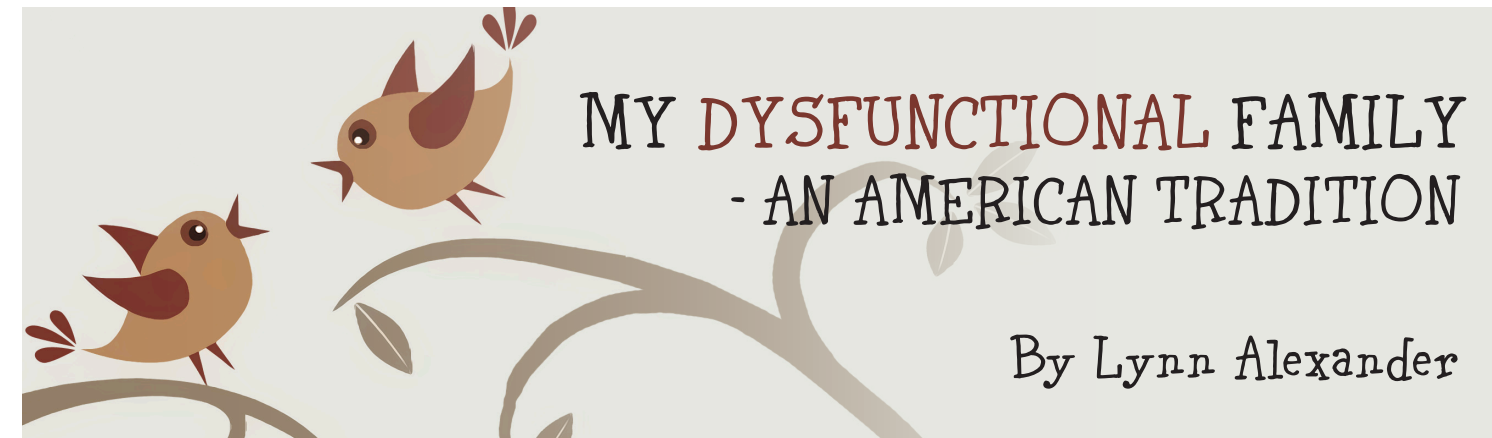
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By Lynn Alexander

For many years Americans tuned into their favorite television shows that often showcased the “perfect family”. On Leave It To Beaver we were never quite sure what the father, Ward Cleaver, did for a living; but he faithfully left the house each morning with briefcase in tow and returned on time for their family dinner. We were pretty sure that Ward was successful in his career since he looked the part; and they lived in a nice house. His wife June kept the perfect home and managed to vacuum while wearing pearls. Both of these parents had time to help their children with homework and have heartwarming discussions working through the latest trials of growing up. Beaver, the adorable younger son, always had a knack for getting into some mischief but nothing too serious. His older brother, Wally, always tried to help him even though he would get frustrated as all older brothers have. It was always the kid down the block who got into real trouble.

Now we know these shows were not real. For some families there may be a bit of the Wards; but for most there is also a bit of, if not a lot of, dysfunction. We often hear about this when people respond to the question: “How were your holidays? The reply often amounts to, “They were wonderful even with my dysfunctional family.” Let’s face it almost every family has an uncle with bad jokes, a sibling who is not living up to their potential, or family members with little annoying habits. Then there are disagreements about how the world should operate. There is a reason for the saying, “Don’t discuss religion or politics around the dinner table.” One of the most rancorous family dinners I experienced was a huge blowup over how everyone felt about Bill Clinton!

Even more difficult are family gatherings that include divorced couples and/or blended families. Whether the occasion is a holiday dinner or a wedding, it is important for all concerned to cherish the importance of family and put aside petty differences while being together. If you are divorced or in the process of one, put your children’s and parents’ needs above your own. Find a way to be civil to each other while joining in family activities. For the family members who are hosting the event it might be wise to have some ground rules set prior to that time. If you have relatives known for turning a family event into a battleground get agreement from them that they will hold a truce for that period of time. Declare your house as Switzerland. If they simply can’t or won’t comply, scatter their visits to avoid destroying everyone’s holiday. As with children, don’t allow fighting to go on in front of elderly parents. They have earned the right to enjoy their family time without conflict.

And to those of you who may be having the difficulty being nice to one another ask yourself, “Do I love my child more than I dislike my former spouse?” Remember that for eternity you will want those lovely wedding photos to showcase real joy instead of fake smiles. To quote the Beatles, “Give peace a chance!”



Lynn Alexander is known as Your Aging Well Advisor, an advocate for seniors and speaker on aging well and caregiving. A former Michigan Cabinet official, State Commissioner on Aging and executive for Oakland County, she recently authored “Caregiver Tsunami”. Lynn Alexander may be contacted by visiting her website at www.YourAgingWellAdvisor.com or by calling (248) 972-4993.



Serving Others With Dignity Dona Venne

By Lee Thorsen

Serving Others With Dignity is a column that puts a needed spotlight on the efforts of so many people who volunteer their time to help others. We hope that this column serves as an inspiration and motivation to help others to experience the joy of volunteering. If you know of a person that deserves to be recognized for their contributions, please let us know.

Dona Venne is an inspiration to all of us who had the courage to take the step to get out there and volunteer her time to help others.

Q What inspired you to begin volunteering and what do you do?

A I retired in 1991 as a speech therapist from Livonia Public Schools after 37 years and learned about a class that was being held at the Turner Geriatric Clinic. It was a class to learn how to be a Peer Volunteer. I started helping out an elderly woman by visiting her once a week. I quickly learned that she was visually impaired so it allowed me to call on her more often and help her relate to the current events. I usually work with one or two people per week. I am also a docent at The Henry Ford & Greenfield Village. A docent is a person who provides commentary on exhibits. I love telling stories and learning about the visitors' experiences with a particular exhibit as well.

Q I hear that you went to school to be a clown. Can you talk about that?

A I'm on the picnic committee for the Turner Geriatric Center. I thought it would be great to have a clown in attendance and decided to go to clown college in La Crosse, Wisconsin. It was a week of fun and hard work. When I got back, I found out that there was additional clown classes held in Livonia.

Q You were one of a handful of U-M peer volunteers to travel to Japan and help train volunteers back in 1998. This was only a few years after the Kobe earthquake in 1995. Japan, as you know, has the oldest population with 21 percent of its population over the age 65. What was your experience like?

A We were there for a week and worked with volunteers from the Univers Foundation. We traveled to Tokyo, Kyoto, and even saw the devastation in Kobe. Univers volunteers provide in-home visiting and other services to the elderly. They

asked me where I got all of my energy and I told them that it comes from having something to look forward to every day.

Q You are a founding member of the Annual Jewelry Sale at the Turner Resource Center. What is this?

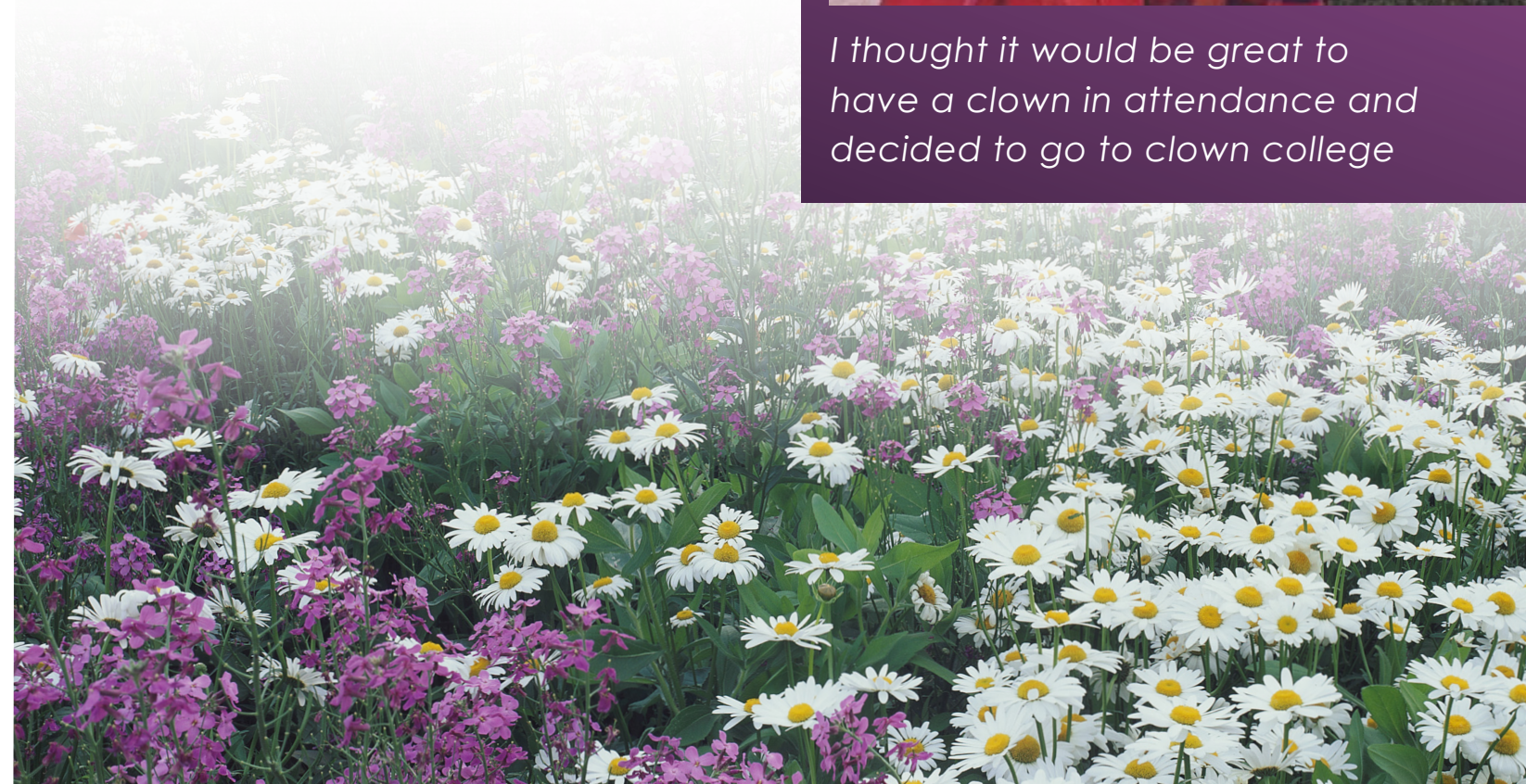
A It's a major fund-raising project where gently used jewelry is donated to us. It's grown so much over the years to include a full room of great and fun jewelry that is sold for the support of the programs offered by the Turner Resource Center.

Q What has volunteering done for you?

A I'm having so much fun volunteering. It really has opened up a whole new world of opportunities for me that I never knew existed. Among other things, I am a member of a travel club called the Nomads and just returned from Costa Rica where I traveled on zip-lines above the rain forest! Also, I make it a priority to take myself to lunch every day – whether it's by myself or with friends – it gets me out to experience life.



I thought it would be great to have a clown in attendance and decided to go to clown college





Older Humans and Older Pets Benefit from Living Together

By Gloria Burke

It's nearly midnight and, as usual, I'm still pecking away on my computer. My tabby cat Tigger needs his "beauty sleep" and is always in bed long before me. On these winter nights he likes to snuggle into the cozy, warm, down quilt on the bed we share. When he senses that I'm staying up too late, he gets up and peeks around the corner staring at me still on my computer. Then he gives me a quizzical look as if to say, "Aren't you ever coming to bed?" He's been my bedtime pal ever since he adopted me nine months ago.

Pets don't care how old you are, how grey your hair is, or whether you're rich or poor. Pets don't require you to tweet or have a Facebook page; all they want is the unconditional love and TLC that only you can give. "Animals can permit the older adult to be alone without being lonely," according to Dr. Alan M. Beck, Purdue University School of Veterinary Medicine. He adds, "Older adults who own animals appear to experience less stress and require fewer visits to their physicians than non-owners."

Today an increasing number of nursing homes and assisted living facilities are adopting their own "live in" pets that soon become like family members. Live in pets stimulate talk, encourage touch, bring moments of fun and laughter, and offer the warmth and affection that only a pet can give. Dr. Beck also believes that "Animal companionship is one way people can be protected from the ravages of loneliness."

In addition, today when you go on vacation it's no longer necessary to hunt for a kennel or ask someone to look in on your furry friend while you're gone. According to Nilou Motamed, features editor for Travel and Leisure Magazine, there are now over 16 million Americans traveling with their pets. She reports that an increasing number of five-star hotels now offer pet-friendly services including oversized pet pillows and check-in gift packages that include a pet toy, a dog treat, ID tag, bone and even a turn-down treat. A few high-end ones even have a doggie masseuse on staff.

Older pets are already housebroken and are generally calmer than their younger brothers and sisters. According to ASPCA statistics, two out of three dogs that enter a shelter never make it out. They spend their days looking on longingly as young families pass them by while searching for that irresistible puppy or kitten to become a playmate for their small children.

As we get older, we may not feel up to the challenge of caring for a young animal, but statistics show that a growing number of older adults are adopting older dogs and cats. In addition older pets come with established personalities and know the rules of good behavior. It's a win for the older adult who benefits from the companionship; it's a win for the pet, too, who can now live in a loving home instead of in a cage in a shelter.

Just talking to pets reduces blood pressure, and depression is less likely to be a factor in a person's life. In addition pets have a tendency to keep loneliness at bay; they give a sense of security just by being present and sharing their love and trust with their owner.

Tigger just looked in on me; I guess it must be time to go to bed.

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