

TO THE WAREHOUSE  
MEMOIR, LIFE WRITING AND OBSERVATIONS

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ABSTRACT  
TO THE WAREHOUSE

To The Warehouse is a personal review of coming of age in the twentieth century. Virginia Woolf is referenced in her memoir *Moments of Being*; she wrote her chronicle at the end of a long and prosperous life as a writer emerging from the Victorian age, where women were treated like commodities controlled by a male-centric society. The parallels to Woolf's life between women in the science and medicine fields are apparent as I came of age in pharmacy in the twenty-first century. Women's professional roles included nurses expected to be subordinate to male physicians, secretaries who could type well and run an office, and teachers of young children.

Aging in our youth-centric society is explored by looking for meaning in the volunteer sphere. I explore the options open to a retired, high-functioning person trying to contribute to society by volunteering. The opportunities such as food banks, museum docents, library aid, and Habitat for Humanity are explored in detail. Personal accounts of working for Habitat for Humanity populate much of the writing for this dissertation, giving a birds-eye view of the daily workings in the Restore.

The meaning of shopping and the rise of consumerism is looked at with the appearance of shopping malls, teaching the value and processing of goods and services. The commodification of the Santa Claus myth is investigated, leading to an overview of gift-giving. The sociological effects of gifts are examined with the human need for connection and inclusion into various groups. The writers David Sedaris and Jean Sheppard add to my observations on the Santa Claus personification in American culture today.

The dissertation is rounded out with observations, stories of my children and their pets, and my grandchildren's attachment to animals.

Lastly, I evaluate my personality formation growing up in an immigrant family dedicated to education as a means to enter the middle class. This creative dissertation revisits formative times and places that give meaning and propose. Understanding the underpinning of personal development is essential to maturation and meaning for successful aging. Included are stories and memoirs, artwork, poetry, and reflections on life.

## DEDICATION

I want to dedicate this dissertation to my husband for encouraging me to continue when I had lost faith with my ability to endure. He assured me I could learn another computer format when I thought all was lost. He reminded me that I am capable and smart. I want to thank him for his patience and encouragement.

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## INTRODUCTION

How do you define the development and influences on women in the twenty-first century? Do you start with being an only child for almost six years to a mother who was isolated and lonely? Is it nurture or nature? Does it help to be born with intelligence and quickness to learn, or does it depend on the constant teaching of a parent?

I needed to be a star student to satisfy my young ego; it was essential to prove to my doting parents that I could succeed in the classroom. They were first-generation immigrants in a country where higher education marked the road to success. My paternal grandparents were denied education in Poland; they needed to learn a trade to survive in “The Golden Land” of America. My maternal grandparents could read and write English but worked as merchants in the new world. Their children (my parents) sought education to become part of the American culture of the twentieth century; their success and status depended on book learning to allow them entry into the middle class. My parents shunned sports but encouraged any intellectual endeavors.

The house was always filled with books to be read, classical records to listen to, and tickets to the opera and plays. My father played 33 ½ records of great composers such as Ravel, Prokofiev, Shubert, and others to enculture the children. Music played a part in our education, as did art. Many of our trips to New York City were to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with continuous lectures by my mother on the great paintings on the walls. I can hear her explaining the outstanding Unicorn Tapestries hung in the Medieval Section of the museum. She loved the Impressionists such as Renoir and

Manet. It is part of my childhood to walk the great museum as though it were home. As a teenager, it became our go-to place for visits to the city.

Learning to look, not just to see, began early and continued into my later years. A friend once told me that I had the “eye”. We were shopping for clothes for her teenage daughter; I put cut and color, and style together to make interesting outfits. To understand the overarching themes of this paper is to appreciate my early ability to see the whole picture and then to parse out the pieces that make it function. Great painters use a one-third two third proportion to bring balance into a piece of art. It may be how humans see, or does it allow the magic to happen? There is balance and harmony, making the vision accessible to the viewer.

The chapter on Earliest Memories began with the tactile sensation of wet earth shaped into pies and scooped into my mouth. The creative process learned in childhood repeated itself in Junior High School when I was given lessons on the potter’s wheel and encouraged to refine my art into functional items. In High School, I continued to gain praise for my artwork and worked to refine my aesthetic. Talent is probably mostly hard work and practice, but praise helps the ego to flower and proceed. A negative comment can crush a child by not allowing for the courage to grow and expand. A positive response allows one to “dine out” on the praise and feel good about continuing to learn and make mistakes. The baseline for growth is the learned structure for building new ideas and visions.

When I was able to return to pottery as an adult, I had a basic idea for creating a bowl or pitcher that used all of the stored up ideas I had filed away over the years. Of course, I had to add to my essential skills with the clay to produce an acceptable

piece. The frustration of acquiring all of the fundamentals was made easier by having a backlog of information handy. Within a relatively short time, I could move into producing more visually beautiful pieces. Once the skills for a basic cylinder were achieved, I could move forward with surface texture and design. My studio mate's praise encourages me to work harder to make more interesting pieces that consider proportion and design.

Chapter one repeats the overall theme of this dissertation. This section talks about working in the Restore at the intake door; accepting bric-a-brac, furniture, glassware, framed art and tools brought into the site by people who want to keep their goods out of the landfills. It recounts the interactions with donators, volunteers and customers in the resale space. Christmas as a national holiday of consumerism is discussed with memories of my childhood with the mythic structure of Santa Claus.

Chapter two works through the interactions of various pets brought into the house by my children. I fondly remember the free dogs, wild bird, PTA fundraiser goldfish and camp gerbils that enriched our lives. My granddaughters add to the stories with therapy guinea pigs and tiny white mice.

Chapter three talks about the pharmacy years, beginning with the difficult college curriculum, through the internship year and positions held as a pharmacist in the retail setting. I recount stories in the store of working Christmas Eve and training technicians. Also, I talk about being fired and working long hours.

Chapter four recounts earliest memories and body shaming in the twentieth century. This section begins with my eating mud at my grandfather's house and

continues through childhood adventures and adolescent issues. I try to come to terms with my body shape and integrate my experiences into my persona as an adult.

Chapter five is a partial display of jewelry, pottery and baking skill I acquired over the years of exploration into the visual and tactile arts.



Iconic image of Santa Claus



Image of The Elf on a Shelf

## CHAPTER 1

### 1. STUFF AND SUCH

I'm hungry and generally annoyed at the world. Today may be the first day of the rest of my life, but I want to be out with people doing things, giving back, and learning new things. Instead, I am sitting at my computer trying to avoid writing the beginning of a hundred-page dissertation. On Tuesday evening, my husband is at work "saving lives" for a living. Usually, I work(volunteer) at Habitat for Humanity, the non-profit that builds homes for people who can't afford decent housing. When I checked my computer messages at seven A.M this morning, Habitat decided to close for this week between Christmas and New Year's due to the continuing onslaught of Covid-19 cases rising in New Jersey. Okay, so I went to my Pilates class at nine A.M. to tone and stretched my aching muscles, then scrounge up some lunch for Leslie, kill some time reading an awful book about a single parent with a difficult child, got my long, silky hair colored to a lovely, soft shade of Irish setter puppy red, then food shop in a new supermarket called Aldi's. This market leaves everything in its original shipping cartons, supplies no bags, and no in-store service. This means there is no one to ask," Where do I find the cans of chopped tomatoes?" Not my favorite place to shop, but it is on the way home and highly touted by my eccentric brother-in-law. He cuts up dead people for a living as a forensic pathologist. How would he know about fresh carrots, anyway? So, yeah, I did stuff, but nothing as interesting as accepting other people's donations of goods they no longer need or want!

The Habitat warehouse is thirty-five thousand square feet of donated building supplies and household objects, some new in original boxes, some gently used, and some outright trash! Plumbing supplies, sheets of laminate flooring, used chairs, couches, dining room tables, lamps, and thousands of glasses, dishes, and bric-a-brac populate the shelves waiting to find new homes with hordes of bargain hunters. My job is to stand at the receiving door of the Restore to smile beatifically and say thank you for the donations given by people who want to contribute their prized possessions and keep them out of the dreaded landfills. First comes a knock on the door, “Are we open? Do we take gorgeous crystal glasses handed down by Great Grandma to mom and now to me? We no longer want these treasures, so we want them to go to a good home that will love them as much as she did.” The yellowed newspaper that protects these treasures dates back about forty years, full of mold and crumbling at the edges. This is a noble idea, but we live in a society of excessive consumerism. The warehouse shelves are lined with thousands of crystal, cut glass, colored cylinders, printed tumblers, wine glasses, shot glasses, mugs, beer steins, champagne flutes, and on and on! Whatever possesses people to collect so much-unnecessary stuff? Perhaps all one needs is a single glass for water, wine, and/or coffee.

“Thank you,” I say, trying to understand the motivation to find forever homes for their cast-off stuff. I want to shout, “This junk is ugly, unusable, and should be trashed!” Cracked or flawed glassware is often thrown away. No one wants to buy it! Sometimes it is put in a huge box marked “Rage-Room.” This business buys glassware by the fifty-gallon bin to allow people to break them with hammers and throw them for entertainment. The charge is twenty dollars for pizza, popcorn, and soda to have a date

night to break glasses for fun! Imagine the idea of this! Who would ever have thought of it? Actually, I love the sound of breaking glass as I toss stuff into the garbage cans. It does release tension and built-up anger.

Christmas is another whole category of all-out consumerism. People buy tinsels, trees, tree bases, ornaments, and creches of Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus at an astonishing rate. As fast as we tag the items with prices, put them on the rolling carts, and bring them to the selling floor, is the rate at which they sell. There is no end to the ways Santa Claus, Frosty-the-snowman, Baby Jesus (blue-eyed with curly blond hair), Mother Mary, and candy canes grace the surfaces of plastic, glass, wood, and ceramic dishes. Those marked Lenox receive prime attention in addition to the accumulation of household junk brought out only for the use of Christmas dinners. The fragile spun glass-colored balls needed to decorate a six-foot tree are endless. As we take them out of their soggy cardboard boxes and color-code them for sale in tied plastic baggies, these fragile orbs crash to the cement floor of the warehouse and shatter into a million pieces. Once again, they are swept up and carted off to the waiting fifty-gallon trash bins. Millions of miles of tangled green wires connect tiny twinkling lights to be draped around the fake evergreens. They must all be tested to see if they still light up or trashed if they won't cooperate in this seasonal madness. Angels( a host of them), lights, keepsakes, wreaths with berries and flowers, and red felt stockings come marching into the donations door. They are gratefully accepted, priced, and put out for sale. Customers quickly snap up these childhood moments to celebrate "Peace on Earth and Joy to Men." Everything must be color-coordinated in shades of cherry red and forest green to bring in the season of happiness consistent with the American dream.



The retail selling floor hosts an Antique Santa Claus, replete with a red velvet jacket and baggy pants, a soft, flowing white beard, and a large belt with a metal buckle. He stands about five feet tall and carries a sack full of toys for good children. He is clearly overweight but ready for sale. The tag on his sleeve says, "Not for Sale." A lady approached me to ask if she could buy this jolly symbol. "Wait, I will talk to the manager to see if we can find a price for him." So, I go to the office asking permission to sell Santa. My general manager hems and haws, "This is an antique Santa that belongs to the warehouse for decorative purposes. I don't think we can sell him". I counter the fact that this doll can bring in between one hundred and fifty to two hundred dollars. He relents and writes up a ticket for the waiting lady who needs to have this wonderful icon in her living room. The customer who needs Santa suddenly can't fit him in her car! Too expensive? Okay, I can hold Santa for two hours while you go home to bring a bigger sedan. Santa stays! The next day the "sale" tag is gone. Only a lonely string tied to his arm remains. I asked the floor manager why the tag was removed. She is irate that anyone would sell this wonderful store decoration. She announces that he belongs to the warehouse and will be used again next year. This might be true, but after being wrapped in plastic and placed in a large plastic bin, Santa will certainly smell of mold and old age! Childhood attachments to non-verbal images die hard.

Santa Claus provides the small child with their first image of God. He knows when you are good and when you misbehave. He rewards the child with a shower of toys when they act properly; he brings coal to those who don't follow the rules. As adults, we internalize this important message to "Do Good" to create harmony in our world. Not many people explore their needs for non-rational symbols in a complex world. These

ideas are deeply embedded in our psyche. This is not the first time I have tangled with someone's deep attachment to myth. A myth is not a falsehood but a story we tell to society. (Joseph Campbell)

“ Campbell defines mythology as the provision of a cultural framework for a society or people to educate their young and to provide them with a means of coping with their passing through different stages of life from birth to death.” (The Power of the Myth) When I was ten years old, I informed my friend that Santa was not a real person delivering gifts to good children but merely one's parents. Susie's mother called my mother to bitterly chew her out because I had disabused her child of this sacred holiday tradition. I was never to be trusted as a friend after that experience!

Recently, a new version of the myth has appeared- The Elf on a Shelf. This creature is now skinny and green with a red striped shirt. He/she seems to be androgynous and speaks to our obsession with a lean, flexible body that can be placed anywhere. He/she is moved by the parent to bookshelves, bathrooms, and kitchens. The Elf eats cookies or yogurt but watches the child's behavior before Christmas, ensuring the kid is good. The concept of being watched is interesting. As children mature, the message is clear! One behaves or does good deeds whether one is being observed or not. God is watching the actions of humans and judging their behavior; rewards are given for the right actions. We may not believe in a fat, jolly human in a red suit sliding down the chimney, but the intent is clear. We are accountable for our actions, or as Sigmund Freud explained, the ideas of a superego. This is a monitor for the wants and demands of the ego. Humans must be more than their basic bodily needs to be fully actualized as adults.

## 2. WHAT DO I DO WITH THE REST OF MY LIFE?

The lifespan of an American woman in the twenty-first century has increased, perhaps into her nineties, due to better nutrition and more efficient medical treatments. Sixty-five was the marker for leaving work and continuing life in a rocking chair. Today, there is an underutilized workforce that does not need to take maternity leave or care for small children. Some Grannies stay at home to allow their children to have free babysitting services, but many are looking for meaningful work to enhance their lifestyle and utilize their years of experience in the workplace. The women I meet who volunteer in the Habitat for Humanity warehouse are retired from corporate jobs that are stimulating and demanding. They look for a place to meet other well-trained women who have retired from the workforce and want to make a contribution to society. Often children and grandchildren do not live nearby. One woman worked as a court investigator; at sixty-five, she took a benefits package from the State of New Jersey. She has enough money to live on, a house, and no children. Rosie divides her time between the Legal Aid Society and the warehouse. She needs a place to go every day so as not to feel lonely and alienated. She is feisty and takes no crap from anyone. My three children are scattered over the United States, requiring long-distance travel for visits. When I was a child, both sets of grandparents lived a half-hour away; they were an integral part of my growing up, like it or not!

## 3. SHOPPING AS AN ACTIVITY; HOW I LEARNED TO MERCHANDISE GOODS.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Paramus, lacking any master plan until 1969, was redeveloped into two shopping corridors when its farmers and outside developers saw

that shopping malls were more lucrative than produce farming. My family moved to this new suburb in 1954 to a freshly built tract house, made affordable by the G.I. bill. My father served with the United States Army in the Pacific rim for five years until the end of World War II; he qualified for this housing perk. Had he been born black, this advantage would not have been available to him. My sister was an infant when we moved into this affordable, new house; my brother was born seven years later. The house was a lovely ranch style with three bedrooms, a living room/ dining room, and a small eat-in kitchen. We had no garage space because my father redesigned the area into a small waiting room with an adjacent counseling office to see patients needing his advice. He had a master's in psychology from Columbia University, although my mother referred to him as the doctor. He could not complete the intern requirement for the doctorate program because he needed to work to provide an income for his growing family. By day, he was a guidance counselor at Hasbrouk Heights High School, with office hours reserved for private patients in the evening in the would-be garage. We all learned to be quiet and tippytoe around when he saw people for appointments. If the office space was empty during the day, my friends and I played games and ate Ritz crackers with jelly on top at his large slab desk made from a mahogany door set up on wooden supports.

Before the shopping Malls were developed, my mother and I went to stores in small cities like Passaic, New Jersey, which were family-owned shops selling clothes for men and women, shoes, cosmetics, perfumes, and lovely china dishes and giftware. It was a treat to be allowed to accompany my mother and aunt on these expeditions into adulthood. I was a consumer of manufactured goods in training. I clearly remember my

aunt buying me my first bra, not that I needed it, in this shop full of wonderful styles, textures, and aromas.

Shopping Malls were the new idea in luring shoppers away from busy city streets to large anchor stores with many smaller shops in one central location. The first mall built in Paramus was the Garden State Plaza. The management of this mall shut down the competition from the smaller stores by invoking the Blue Laws. These laws were meant to restrict most activities on Sundays and date back to 1704. The state legislature adopted these laws in 1798 and called the law the “Act to Suppress Vice and Immorality”. This legislation demanded that no store in Bergen county could sell anything but food on Sundays. This quasi-religious intervention allowed the malls to be closed on Sundays by fining the small shops. This edict also prevented liquor stores and bars from being open on Sundays. It was also a means of demanding people attend church rather than commune in bars on the Sabbath.

The Plaza had two anchor stores, Gimbels and Bamberger's, many shoe shops and small specialty shops, restaurants, and lovely places to eat. The gardens between the stores were lined with flower boxes, trees, and walking areas. It was a nice place to visit even if one didn't want to buy anything. My days as an acquirer of merchandise continued in this lovely environment. Shopping became a hobby, not just a destination to fill a need.

Travis L. Osborne, the director of the Anxiety Center at the Evidence Based Treatment Centers of Seattle, says, “Shopping and consuming are reinforcing behaviors. At the brain level, neurochemicals that are related to feeling good get released when we buy things.”(Marie Kondo Is Here to Tidy Up Your Pandemic Clutter).

My friends and I loved to walk the mall, enticed by the colors and fabrics we could buy if we had the money. The latest fashion trends were presented in the best possible light. I developed my “eye” for discerning carefully made clothes from shoddy merchandise. I learned to look at the inside seams and stitching of the goods. Most of the time, I was given fabric and patterns to sew my own clothes due to a lack of funds for pre-made bought clothing. Spacial design, a sense of color, and learning to look came from these frustrating forays into consumer heaven. Laying out Simplicity or Butterick patterns improved my ability to visualize space in three dimensions. This early training was put to use later on when I learned to chisel designs in stone and fabricate silver jewelry.

The second shopping center to open was called The Mall. It had not only large department stores but also a foreign film movie theater and a playhouse for live performances. My friend Karen worked as an usher in the playhouse. She snuck me into such wonderful presentations as Annie Get Your Gun with Ethel Merman, Ibsen’s A Doll’s House, and many other first-rate performances. The movie house showed my first Swedish film, probably x rated, was Dear John! (1964). I still remember the couple being in bed with the sheets all messed up, but very little else was seen. This was my introduction to sex on film as a teenager. Hot stuff!

Then came a high-end mall called The Fashion Center with B.Altman’s and Lord and Taylor as the department stores. They carried more expensive merchandise for the burgeoning middle-class population of the surrounding areas. These shops were once the purview of the carriage trade on Fifth Avenue in New York City. We loved walking this mall with its high-end shops and expensive eateries. Even if I could not afford the

clothes, I could have snacks of coffee and cookies with my friends. Both of these stores have gone out of business to be replaced by more affordable options. Discount shopping took a toll on these shops by the late 1960s.

Window shopping on Fifth Avenue in the city was also an activity that my friend Carol and I pursued. I loved the fine china in Richard Ginori and the beautiful sterling silver in Buccellati across from Bergdorf Goodman. I never thought I would have enough money to buy any of these expensive items. When my husband made enough money, I was privileged to buy the blue rose pattern of Ginori for my company dinner dishes at a discount. Of all the things I own, these dishes bring me back to those times when window shopping was all I could do. Objects certainly get their hooks into you by transcending time and bringing back memories. The plates are certainly lovely, but the need they fill is far greater than their monetary value.

Lastly, Paramus Park opened to complete the frenzy for goods and services. The draw for this space was the inclusion of many live trees inside the enclosed area; it had so many trees that it was designated a park.

My favorite as I got older was the Fashion Center due to its high-quality merchandise. I developed and refined my taste through constant shopping and comparison. When asked where I grew up, I would often say a shopping center! I thought it normal behavior to walk the malls for exercise or emotional release, just as others learned to hike or ski. As I touched the soft, colorful fabrics, eavesdropped on ladies' conversations, and enjoyed the adventure in this safe space, calm returned. The aroma of coffee in paper cups settled my nerves. I could breathe again and return to demanding children and difficult professional life. Today, my talents are not being

wasted at Habitat for Humanity when I evaluate merchandise for resale. I am surprised how much I know about the value and quality of goods pouring into the Restore. I can recognize a Lalique crystal glass or Limoge serving dish easily due to my repeated research as a consummate consumer of goods. It leads me to wonder why I needed to possess so much stuff. Perhaps as a child of an immigrant mother, we purchased goods to feel part of the American scene. Having the right serving dish or correct spoon gave a sense of security in a household trying to fit in. It was unacceptable to look like a “greenie” (someone off the boat), an immigrant in a foreign land. Striving for acceptance and fitting in became important. My hair was streaked with blonde at the salon to complete the image of an American icon of the sixties. Blending into society became an active preoccupation for my family. I was called the “shiksa” by my Lithawanian grandparents because my transformation into a truly American girl modeled after the prevailing image. Shopping by the middle class mimicked the mores and values of the upper class. Gold-rimmed crystal, fine china from Germany or England, and sterling silver flatware was required to set a beautiful table like those pictured in the women’s magazines. Women wanted to look like they went to finishing school with finely made clothes by an upper-crust tailor. Much of this mimicry broke down in the sixties with the new iconoclastic hippy generation. Proper skirts and ironed blouses gave way to blue jeans and tee shirts. Slacks became the norm for women going to work. Sprayed and stiffly coiffed hair lost value, along with the mandatory weekly visit to the hair salon. When I started college in 1966, all ten of the women in my class of 110 men wore skirts to school, even in the biting cold of Manhattan winter. It was considered proper for pharmacists in training to look professional. Soon, the new freshman girls arrived



wearing pants; we changed! No longer did we have to freeze in the biting winds sweeping down the city avenues. Slacks and boots were warm and comfortable compared to thin, tight skirts. Women were not impeded by their clothes and shoes; they could begin to compete with men who wore sensible pants and shoes made for walking.

My biggest thrill in the '70s was to wear blue jeans, the great unifier of class, to a fancy store like Bonwit Teller. Of course, the pants were French designer denim, but it was a beginning. Women were finally relieved of annoying crinolines, skirts, white gloves, and refined hats. Were the equal rights amendment and equal pay for equal work far behind? The department store employees gladly sold us clothes and shoes as though we were upper-class ladies in expensive suits. The snooty salesladies could no longer tell the rich from the poor. Today women wear tights or exercise clothes for shopping as normal attire. Sometimes I wish the ladies would assess their behinds in the "rear view" mirror before going out in unflattering styles.

#### **4. HABITAT FOR HUMANITY; WHY DO I VOLUNTEER FOR HABITAT?**

I volunteer for Habitat because I believe in contributing to the making of a better world. A single person can make a difference. I unwrap, price, and place dishes and glassware in the warehouse for customers to purchase. These once precious items are offered for reuse and resale rather than thrown them into a landfill when they are no longer needed. This changes the outlook of society little by little. Not every object must be spanking new and right out of the box. Many things can continue to be useful after their original owner no longer needs them. We can all contribute in small ways to make our earth a better place to live.

I like to walk the warehouse floor straightening out merchandise and presenting them in the best way to make them saleable. I like helping customers to find what they need and hearing their stories. I enjoy working with volunteers and paid employees for a team effort.

Lastly, the warehouse is a good place to get exercise on a cold, wintry morning. I walk, bend, rearrange stuff, and talk to people; I go home happy to be able to do my part. Also, I learn something new every day!

As I came to work and became entrenched in the possibility of making a difference, I began to question the validity of the organization and its motives. Does it make sense to work for no pay-free? After a long career as a pharmacist, I find it valuable to share my knowledge of merchandising goods and services and my acquired skills of listening to the needs of others. Working in the warehouse allows me to use my knowledge to train new volunteers and interact with customers and workers. Feeling useful and important becomes the payment for the right actions that money cannot buy.

The atmosphere at the Restore is one of comradery and hope. The volunteer can sign up for jobs in the warehouse, concierge desk, or the donations door for two, four, or more hours. Thank yous are offered many times for the work of the volunteer.

When I check into the computer to log in for my volunteer hours, Rose greets me with, "Hi, so happy to see you today!" Tony says, "Today is going to be a good day!" The corporate culture is one of being positive and making people feel welcome. Donations are valued, and people are made to feel that they are helping to keep things out of landfills while contributing to building houses with volunteers, professional workmen, and people who will receive the work brings together many segments of society.

I like to get my hands dirty and feel tired at the end of the day. There is so little that I can do to bring about a more fair distribution of wealth and resources. Habitat seems to help me contribute. It reminds me of where my ancestors came from when they had little to eat and unsafe places to live. It is not enough to “make it” in America; we must help immigrants and low-paid workers to achieve the American dream.

## 5. DESIGN AND LAYOUT

I work (laughingly said) at Habitat for Humanity two to three days a week. It is a happening place to go where people come in and out looking for inexpensive, gently used stuff at good prices. Customers wait for the doors to open at ten in the morning to be the first to grab all the new goods donated the day before by people downsizing their homes, dying, or getting rid of accumulated junk. People donating the contents of whole houses often drive to the warehouse with rented trucks or vans packed full of the accumulation of a lifetime. Often the donor is a daughter or daughter-in-law who cleans up a family home. Customers descend on the used couches, chairs, dining room tables with matching chairs, garden tools, glassware, dishes, pots and pans, office supplies, and on and on to furnish their houses. The donated goods are given with the hope of supporting a charity that builds homes for low-income families. Contractors pick up used or new windows and doors for their building projects. Resale dealers look for valuable antiques to post on E-bay to make a few dollars. Sometimes whole office buildings are liquidated; The desks, chairs, tables, files, and staplers are donated for resale by Habitat. Pallets of ceramic tile, wood flooring, and acrylic paint are also sold.

My job as a volunteer is to accept, graciously, the offerings of people donating household items at the warehouse parking lot door. The donator rings the bell. I ask them

what they have brought. Unfortunately, Habitat does not allow us to take electronics, baby furniture, or messed-up upholstered chairs. If there are too many china cabinets, I must refuse to take them because no one wants to buy these items. Entertainment centers are not an item anyone wants because television sets have changed dramatically. They are thin and light and can be placed on a table. I try to thank the person for thinking of Habitat and redirect them to a non-profit dealing with their once-loved items. Electronics such as computers and television are recycled by Green Visions or the Staples store down the road. People want us to take everything they cart into the donations door. Many times they will argue with me that their stuff is worth taking. Or they ask if I can trash the item for them! Habitat pays for a garbage removal. Two train car-size bins are filled weekly and removed by an expensive garbage service.

Then, I take the offerings out of their carefully wrapped cartons and price them with pre-printed stickers of one, two, or perhaps three dollars. A crystal tray may have cost a hundred dollars twenty years ago, but now, sadly, it will only sell for three dollars. Hundreds of glass trays come to the Restore every week. The law of supply and demand comes into play- too much supply and insufficient demand! Lenox china, once prized for its elegance with gold or silver rims, is no longer wanted by this generation of young people. It cannot withstand the rigors of the dishwasher or the microwave. Crystal stemware is seen as bourgeois; sturdy Ball canning jars have become the cool way to drink wine. Bread machines, once the darling of the modern kitchen, have seen their heyday; no one wants to be bothered. Keurig coffee makers, with their wasteful little pods of coffee, are on the donate list!

The tagged goods are placed on rickety, donated rolling carts and brought out onto the selling floor to be displayed on waiting shelves. The 35,000-square-foot warehouse has racks prepared for contributions. Dealers stalk my arrival looking for sterling silver, important bits of signed pottery, and collectible merchandise for resale in local antique shops and auction houses in Pennsylvania.

Mark Doty writes, “We’d rented a U-Haul and driven to the flea market, at dawn, with all we decided not to bring along; even as we were unloading the truck, the dealers lurched across the grass toward us, in the half-dark, like the ghouls in *Night of the Living Dead*.” (Still Life with Oysters and Lemons,38). He describes the feeling of entering the selling part of the warehouse with the dealers waiting for anything of value to resell at a profit. They do seem like mindless people who are ghoulish in their need to scoop up anything of value. I make friends with some of these individuals by pointing out the new, shiny acquisitions. They gather around me to examine the huge array of goods on my wobbly, tiered rolling cart before they allow me to place the trinkets on the waiting shelves. Some of the volunteers are clearly daunted by this massive display of adoration for the items on the carts. Warnings are given at the front desk to allow us to get to our destinations before attacking with such a vengeance.

Damien tells me over the years, he educated himself on the various markings on the bottom of china dishes; he knows what is worth sending to auction and what is not. He is a retired auto mechanic of about sixty years old with thinning hair, neat blue jeans, and a slight Italian accent. It turns out he is actually from a Slavic country. He lost most of his childhood friends in the war that ensued. He walks the Restore almost daily looking for low-priced goods to resell at auction. His favorite comment is, “It’s

nutting!”, not worth his time! He tries to educate me on the value of stuff, but I am not a collector! I am happy when he finds something good to make a few dollars on. The money accumulates to help supply families with decent housing-yay!

Another dealer with a black, grizzly beard and inquisitive eyes asks my opinion of a Kenmore sewing machine before he invests in buying it. I tell him Kenmore was a brand of the Sears and Roebuck company, which is out of business. I show him how to connect some of the parts, so it becomes worth buying. He reciprocates one day when a wheel falls off of my secondhand, rickety cart. He kneels down on the dusty, cold warehouse floor to screw the roller back into the socket. It is like calling AAA. Only he comes at once! I thank him a million times! My disaster of broken glasses and fragile dishes was narrowly averted by his kind actions. When glass hits the warehouse floor, it shatters into a million tiny pieces; this requires finding a broom and dustpan to repeatedly sweep the area scouring for tiny fragments of sharp, angular bits of treacherous glass. Customers often drop breakables on this surface only to walk away as if nothing happened. I get used to cleaning up messes left by others. It is nice to have someone help me, for once!

My eye for space and design has been honed over many years of designing silver jewelry and executing these ideas using solder, semi-precious stones, and other metals. When I place an item for sale on a shelf, it must own its space to appeal to the buyer. A lot of little tchotchkes must not crunch in the space for larger, more important goods. Like items belong with like items; silver trays belong with other large and small silver trays, crystal bowls belong with glass plates and trays made of the same materials. My motto is to eschew obfuscation! All the decorations for Halloween belong together on

shelves saved for that holiday. Bright orange pumpkins, black witches' hats, hairy spiders, and collecting bags for candy must sit together, waiting for their buyers. Color is a big factor in setting out attractive arrangements. Forest green bowls or lemon yellow vases attract instant attention. People are attracted to bright, attractive displays. The tall vases go on top shelves, the medium items at eye level, and the flat glass trays wait below. Certain items sell at once, like silk flower arrangements, blue and white Chinese vases, and anything with bunnies. I place these goods near the checkout registers where they catch the eye and sell quickly, leaving space for more bits and pieces. Impulse buying is a wonderful thing! The need for collecting and the sense of satisfaction by scoring bargains seems to be endemic to society. I try to resist all attempts to fall prey to cuteness and things that serve no reasonable use. I am a pragmatist at heart!

I can see when an object is not claiming its proper space. When there is too much confusion on the shelf, the shoppers find it hard to make a choice. Walking the warehouse floor in the morning, I obsessively remove stuff to create a calming sense of harmony with the diverse objects. Even if customers are needy or poor, they must be respected with orderly displays of used merchandise. Sometimes, I try to convey to the other volunteers how to place goods in an appetizing way, so they sell nicely. It is a difficult task to explain to other people what I automatically see! The store manager often turns over new volunteers to me, hoping I can train them before they accumulate their hundred hours of school credit for graduation. Sometimes they understand, sometimes not at all. Learning to look, not just see, is a difficult concept. Also, no one wants the last object on the shelf. People like to have a choice in their selections.

Customers strew merchandise everywhere when they decide not to take them to the checkout line. They do not take the extra time to replace the stuff where it once was found. Sometimes my husband and I walk through Kohl's on a Saturday night after dinner to check prices and look at the goods offered. I find myself refolding tee shirts, and jeans left askew and putting them back in their proper place. I must remind myself that I do not work for Kohl's. The store has paid employees to do this thankless job. Perhaps I feel sorry for the endless hours spent picking up after thoughtless people!

## 6. PLACING OBJECTS IN THE WAREHOUSE

The warehouse hired a new part-time manager to replace the guy with serious mental health issues. He seemed to be bipolar, sometimes happy and sometimes obnoxiously out of control. He would fixate on telling me a story and not be able to leave out any of the details. I liked him well enough but began to find his constant "picking" on me tedious. I learned to answer him in one-word answers such as "yup" or "great" so as not to provoke him to go on and on. He liked to complain about his daughter's teachers at her school. He felt that they were treating her unfairly and she did not need special help to do better. It seemed to me that his daughter was in serious trouble with school and needed lots of help. Leah, the other furniture manager started to comment on how much time Neil was focused on teasing me, which made me more conscious of my feelings of being under fire.

On a quiet morning in January, a new guy introduced himself at the warehouse to replace Neil, who had gotten into serious trouble and was not returning to the workplace. Horst is of Swedish lineage, about six foot two, and quietly handsome. He is about thirty years old with previous warehouse experience. I introduced him to our protocol at this



site by showing him how to take out the fifty-gallon garbage pails filled with the wrappings and stuff brought in for donation. People collect a huge amount of things, then realize they no longer need or want all of them, and offer them to this non-profit warehouse.

The usual conversation begins with, “These dishes or glasses or knick-knacks belonged to my grandmother, passed down to my mother, and now I want you to have them!” Objects have great symbolism and memories attached. It takes a great amount of effort to give away the emotional experiences wrapped up in things. Christmas ornaments carried a large amount of nostalgia and collected memories that were attached to each and every object hung upon the tree. Objects get their hooks into a person and make it hard to disencumber oneself.

My husband’s aunt liked to give expensive gifts when we first bought our house in Parsippany. She became annoyed with us when her daughter divorced her husband. We remained friendly with the husband, which angered her daughter. Aunt rose became nasty and vindictive to us. I could not continue to use the glass trays and other gifts without thinking of her. I gave the presents away so as not to think of her. Her presence was no longer wanted! Marie Kondo had a three-part series on Netflix called “Sparkling Joy with Marie Kondo.” She says, “-keep the stuff that brings you joy and toss the rest.” The gifts no longer brought me joy.

When I was sixteen years old, my mother bought me a much coveted Irish Beleck dish shaped like a heart with a translucent glaze that mirrored light. It is light as a feather and looks incredibly fragile. This present brought tears to my eyes because it was not an expected gift due to its expense and the cachet it brought to me. Later on, I learned the

designer was a woman named Anne Armstrong, who sculpted fine pieces for Beleek in the 1900 hundreds. Many of her works are in The Metropolitan Museum in New York City. This dish came with me through many moves and still brings back fond memories today. It educated me on fine Parian china that still influences my pottery today.

We gratefully accept people's precious donations, wrapped up securely in bubble wrap or brown, crumbling newspaper that makes me sneeze from the included mold and say, "Thank you for thinking of us!" At least half of these offerings are junk! They cannot be sold and must be trashed! I have never had a donor say, "This is ugly, stupid garbage. My mother hated it. I hate it. And now I am free of this mess!" Thank you, thank you, we say! Anyway, cynicism aside, I have the opportunity to train a newbie on how to organize the collections station and how to place a myriad of objects onto the warehouse shelves for their best possible showing.

Besides walking the fifty-gallon buckets of junk and wrappings to the far end of the thirty-five thousand square foot warehouse, there are two six-foot-tall wire-enclosed bins on wheels where the cardboard cartons are tossed. They must be wheeled through to store to the back end of the space to the baling operation. This machine squashes the cartons into a mass so they can be recycled for reuse. Now that the receiving end of the store is free of cardboard and trash, it is ready for new donations. Donors bring cartons and bags in by a door with a doorbell or by an open garage door with hanging plastic flaps. It is January. It is freezing cold. I dread the need to open the door to deliver gently-used furniture. My feet freeze. My fingertips freeze. I try to stay warm by stretching my fingers in front of the electric space heater, but this is a temporary solution

to the ongoing fifteen-degree winter torment in New Jersey. To add to the chilled feeling, the warehouse floor is concrete, cold and dusty.

Cartons of glassware arrive by people seeking to keep the landfills free of objects fueled by the American obsession with buying. Horst and I unwrap these treasures and gently place them on the waiting carts to be priced and placed on shelves on the selling floor. Beautiful champagne glasses, water goblets, shot glasses, white wine, red wine stemware, and parfait crystal appear. It is astonishing how many variations of drinking glasses are made to contain assorted liquids! The clear glasses sell for one dollar, no matter how fine or lovely they are; the colored ones sell for two dollars. We don't price them individually but put them on shelves with a sign announcing their minimal cost. So many glasses are donated to the store that a service called, "The Smashing House" buys these fragile beauties. This franchise allows people to break glasses for twenty minutes and eat pizza and popcorn for a fun night out for a fee of twenty dollars. We charge them about ten cents a glass or by the large bin for the privilege of having people take out their anger and frustration on beautiful glassware. Modern life needs an outlet from the constant buzz of our cellphones and the glaring light of computer screens to remain relatively sane in a world of Covid-19. Just walking the floor of the warehouse releases tension and brings sanity to my never-ending concern for the future of the crazy world we live in.

The boxes of donations also hold dishes, sets or individual plates, vases, platters, teapots, sugar and creamers, tiny wooden boxes filled with mini figurines, and on and on. Everything is priced with a preprinted label of one or two dollars, maybe three if the object is especially cute or saleable. Pricing is arbitrary and based on the need to move

items rapidly through the facility to have space for more stuff. Sometimes, large decorative items arrive wrapped in bubble wrap or old crumpled newspaper with a date from 1995. Fireplace screens, two-foot-long candle holders made of brass, poured plastic objects made to look antique, fragile clay, and of course, glass objects are brought into the warehouse to be loved again in someone's living room or family room. Blue and white porcelain vases and pitchers, figures of ancient cats, and Chinese foo dogs are snapped up for placement in their new homes. People want fake(silk) flower arrangements of any color or size to decorate their houses. The saying goes; one man's treasure is another man's trash!

Now is my opportunity to train a new warehouse manager to place these valuable objects on the many shelves so they can sell quickly and bring funds for Habitat for Humanity. My lifelong experience in "learning to look" rather than just seeing stuff is brought into play. I am told that I have the "eye" to work with color and design, to space objects at just the right distance from each other for maximal display. Of course, I have been making crafts, sewing, and painting for as long as I can remember. Okay, now I have to give a quick lesson on how to "see" to this new manager. I try to give him some simple rules of merchandising.

1. Concentrate colors- all the little cups and blue bottles go together.
2. Match sizes-tiny figurines and dolls look well on a top shelf.
3. Place small objects on eye-level shelves- this allows the buyer to focus on the little stuff.

4. Place medium-sized objects on middle shelves-no one looks below waist level or bends down to see what is tucked under a bottom shelf. Any space below the waist is “dead” space for selling purposes.

5. Bulky or massive stuff goes on the bottom -like large vases, massive book-ends, or grandfather clocks.

6. Like items group with like items - Eliminate confusion! Try to allow each object to own its space; make it important.

7. Place large vases or colorful items slightly out of reach on top shelves to make people look up first, then scan down the levels before reaching the bottom.

The rule of three holds in grouping goods. Fibonacci was right. Humans accept the order in paintings and displays when trisected. Placing three teapots together on a shelf seems to call attention to the objects while giving a sense of purposeful order. Arranging all the handles to the right suggests they are ready to be picked up and taken home. It tells a story that includes the buyer in the process. The arrangement beckons the viewer to enter the display.

Deconstruct the mess. The warehouse has no stock control. We accept whatever we can to sell stuff at a minimal price. The better the bargains, the more the traffic of people coming into the store, and the greater the sales volume. Besides, bric-a-brac, furniture, used lighting, athletic supplies, cookware, coffee pots, books of every sort, and donated building supplies such as cases of ceramic tiles, doors in frames, and boxes of measuring string arrive at a moment's notice at a dizzying pace. All this stuff must be placed on shelves or given floor space for maximal turnover. For example, thirty cases of twelve-inch blue or orange decorative chickens are sent to the site, along with eighteen-

inch black and lime green spiral pieces used to give a “pop” of color to a white living room. The distributor had too many and could not send them back to China, so they were donated for tax write-offs. Habitat for Humanity is a charity that helps low-income people afford housing in sustainable neighborhoods.

All of these objects must be placed on shelves for the customer to think, “Oh my, wouldn’t this chicken look lovely next to my fireplace or in my garden next to my gnomes!” Personally, I hate fat blue ceramic chickens! So, we must bring order out of chaos. First, all the blue chickens are grouped in a never-ending flock; then, the orange birds sit together. The foot-tall black ceramic spires sell first; it’s October and nearly Halloween. The lime green decorative spires follow in quick succession. Orange birds go to good homes, leaving us with the adorable blue chickens. As Christmas decorations begin to flood the store, the bright blue fowl are sent to the back of the shop to be ignored for a time as the Christmas rush for tinsel, ornaments, platters with Christmas designs, and trees take the forefront of buying. Sometimes the chicken sculptures are found scattered around, but I carefully return them to their flock to maximize their impact on the viewer’s eye. Now, it is January, Christmas is over, and the bright blue fowl are returned to the shelves near the check-out stands at the front of the store. Yes, the remaining flock is moved, yet again. Regular Customers often comment that we should trash these lovely sculptures, but I cannot do this. Slowly, slowly the sedentary flock of birds decreases from about two dozen to about twelve. Surely, they will be sold by Spring when Easter bunnies, fluffy yellow chicks, and pastel-colored eggs will populate the selling spaces. Humans seem to need to collect so much stuff! I wonder why?

As I give Horst the grand tour of the facility, I try to explain what I have learned in my merchandising experience in the pharmacy for forty years. He seems to catch on as he comments, “You have been doing this for a very long time!” Yes, stuff is not to be plopped anywhere! Merchandise must be displayed with love to sell. The shopper must feel he or she is bringing home a prized possession to add to their burgeoning collection of treasured items.

Sometimes the general manager stops by as I organize goods for sale to comment on how nice everything looks. I glow with pride! Maybe I can make a small difference in the world. Aging brings a closing of opportunities; it is nice to feel useful and productive. Walking, bending, and sorting are tiring activities, but I feel better about myself and my place in the universe. The pharmacy was my source of connection with people and services, but now I transition into helping people find what they need for their homes to feel safe and happy. I become so wrapped up in this sorting process that includes walking and repeatedly bending that I don’t feel the need to snack anymore. Lunch consists of black coffee (free in the break room) and a granola bar; I lose fifteen pounds! Doing good does good!

## 7. MARIA WALKS THE WAREHOUSE

Today is a rainy Saturday in early spring at the Habitat warehouse. The flurry of activity in shopping for the new goods ready to be placed on the selling floor is amazing. My three-tiered rolling cart with bad steering is attacked by shoppers who need and crave to buy the new merchandise donated. The anxious consumers of goods stop me as I push open the floor-length plastic flaps that unjustly slap me in the face. I exit the restricted space at the back onto the retail area.

Maria comes to the Restore almost every day that I volunteer. She is a small middle-aged woman with brownish, curly hair and colorless baggy clothes with a lovely, winning smile. She stops to examine some of the offered goods.

“Can I show you the tailored dust ruffle for a king-sized bed?” I ask her. It is brand new, made of cotton in a neutral color. Her English has the cadence of one not born in the United States. She says she no longer needs a king-sized bed because her husband died last year. She would like to change to a queen-sized bed.

“I am so sorry for your loss.”

“Yes,” she says, “I come to the warehouse for a place to go. I am lonely and like to be here with people.” With tears welling up in my eyes, I assure her that she is welcome to come here anytime. I like seeing her; she adds to my joy of working in the warehouse. Often, I walk the extensive floor to relieve myself of anxiety. The news of COVID-19, or Russia’s attack on undeserving people in Ukraine, makes my teeth chatter and my brain spin. Helping people find little things to furnish their homes or their children’s houses makes me happy; it settles my nerves! The more I walk, the calmer I feel.

Sometimes she shows me the goods she collects in her shopping basket. Maria has a Mouley food colander in her rickety, second-hand shopping cart. It was donated and priced to sell for two dollars. She does not know what this piece of equipment does, but she likes the looks of it and is buying it anyway. I explain to her how to use this nifty contraption.

“You cut up the apples into large chunks, but you do not have to peel them or take out the seeds. Then cook the apples with cinnamon and sugar until they are tender.



(about twenty minutes) Finally, the Mouley separates the peel and seeds from the apples to make applesauce,” I tell her. She seems to understand my instructions and leaves happy.

On her next visit, she buys gently used pots and pans and cookware for her daughter, who bought a new house and needs to acquire more stuff for cooking. She tells me she bought an alarm clock on her last visit, but it does not work. Oh, my!

Perhaps I will see her again on Tuesday when the warehouse is open. We will interact more or at least say hello! Maybe we are both happy to make contact with another human being? The worst punishment humans suffer is that of isolation. Prisoners are put in solitary confinement to force them to behave. This deprivation of contact with other humans causes depression and regression. People need contact with other human beings to maintain a healthy outlook on life. The aging process causes more isolation due to reduced capabilities and the contraction of social structures that support the elderly. Volunteering offers me the chance to be out and about, learning and talking to many people. I interact with retired volunteer women and younger adults making a living at the warehouse.

Lately, my husband has volunteered at the warehouse with me. He loves to greet people at the donation door, unwrap merchandise and place things in the selling spaces. He has just retired from a busy medical practice and needs to feel needed and wanted. He likes to get up in the morning and have a place to go. The best part of this new chapter in our lives is that he makes my lunch every day. He makes sandwiches from smoked turkey, chicken, or roast beef with mustard or mayonnaise on whole grain bread. Les includes grapes or watermelon chunks to round out the meal. Before he came to work

with me, I grabbed a granola bar with a cup of black coffee. I love to cook elaborate meals but hate to make sandwiches. We are learning to work together and not argue too much in front of people!

Working with my husband reminds me of the T.S. Eliot poem:

“I grow old ... I grow old ...

I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?

I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves

Combing the white hair of the waves blown back

When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea

By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown

Till human voices wake us, and we drown.”

— T.S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

This poem has stayed with me from my high school days. It is a poignant reminder of aging that I am now beginning to understand. The image of wearing one's trousers rolled up evokes loss and coming to terms with the isolation of getting older. Even the mermaids ignore him; he has become invisible. He is even afraid to eat a peach!

The lyrics of OLD FRIENDS by Simon and Garfunkle come to mind as I come to terms with aging and becoming useless in a society that values youth.

Old friends, old friends  
Sat on their park bench like bookends  
A newspaper blown through the grass  
Falls on the round toes  
Of the high shoes of the old friends  
Old friends, winter companions, the old men  
Lost in their overcoats, waiting for the sunset  
The sounds of the city sifting through trees  
Settle like dust on the shoulders of the old friends  
Can you imagine us years from today  
Sharing a park bench quietly?  
How terribly strange to be 70  
Old friends, memory brushes the same years  
Silently sharing the same fears

This poem evokes the same kind of loss and gentle sadness as Eliot's poem. I can feel the pathos and longing for times past now that I am seventy. My husband and I have become old friends sharing a park bench quietly. But no, I will not go quietly in that good night! I will go on volunteering and meeting people and walking the warehouse for as long as I can.

## 8. KIM IN THE WAREHOUSE

There is a new cashier at the warehouse. She does not look happy. Her mousy once-blonde hair is pulled back in a messy ponytail. She is too thin, with the crumpled face of a smoker-drinker. Perhaps she has had a hard life which is announced by her too soon old appearance. I give her a cheerful hello to encourage her in her first days at her new job. She looks up but does not see me. When I meet her in the break room, she tells me everyone is mean to her. Hmmn... Did you try killing them with kindness? Nasty people often respond well to others being super-nice. I was taught this trick by my fellow employees at the pharmacy where I worked for thirty-five years. I gradually learned to respond with kind words to people who were mean and aggressive.

Once, an offensive lady once threw her prescription bottle at me when I told her she had no refills left to fill. I calmly picked up the vial and asked her not to throw things at me and that I would call her doctor to get her some medication. I was told she was nasty at the supermarket, the bank, and everywhere she went. I was not the cause of her misery but would only add to my own sense of unease by meeting fire with fire. So, I responded calmly and learned to “slime” her with niceness. It is hard to keep your temper under control when people attack for no reason. Another time Mrs. Smith had to wait while the cashier, Tony, attended to another customer. She fumed and grumbled her displeasure.

Tony calmly took care of the first lady, then said to Mrs. Smith, “I am sorry you had to wait so long for service. Please allow me to do better next time.” She was floored by his patience and kindness and walked away calmly. Watching that transaction gave me a new perspective on handling disgruntled customers. Tony was a professional at

dealing with people; he was an experienced car salesman, now retired, who understood people.

Eventually, I am approved by the state of New Jersey to have my security clearance to become a cashier. Peter, the senior computer guru helps me to learn the system along with Christina, the young woman on the other register. I thought it would be fun to learn something new besides checking in donated merchandise. The new point-of-sale computer system is a mash-up of an older system overlaid with a new program. It is slow going to find the correct category to bring up, then find the item in that area and locate the possible prices listed by their first letter rather than by the number. For example, the number one is listed by the letter “o,” not by the ordinal “1”. I watch Kim ring up sales, then move over to Christina’s register to try and learn the system. She seems to have no trouble with this erratic work-around register. I can follow her endless keystrokes but need help to do this work on my own. Glassware is listed under “decor.” Then, the possible price choices must be found and entered. Customers demand store discounts, senior discounts on Fridays, and veteran discounts. It is a slow process made nerve-wracking by the lengthening line of people waiting to pay for goods. It makes me tired and angry; this is not my first tangle with irrational work systems.

Kim begins to curse, using the fuck word because she needs to have a fifteen-minute break for a cigarette. Her gray skin shows the effects of her addiction to nicotine. Unfortunately, she is overheard by Christina.

Cute, overweight in baggy jeans and tee-shirt and braces on her teeth, young Chris reports her to the store manager for saying, “she needs a fucking break; the fifteen minutes belong to her!” Every time Kim speaks, this snitch reports her to the authorities!

I am sorry that Kim is so stressed by her addiction and can't wait for her cigarette or vape.

The next day, the manager called me into the office to verify what Kim had said in utter frustration. She had made inappropriate comments before about customers who annoyed her. I do not want to make her life any harder than it already is. She is working at this low-paying job, afraid of an impending divorce, and dealing with a serious addiction. As I am questioned, trying not to remember the incident, I cave into my questioners. Boy, am I unhappy when I leave that office. I don't like the way that I feel. I don't like throwing people under the bus. I am a healthcare provider, not an executioner.

The manager asked me to write a statement testifying to Kim's behavior. Are they looking for enough evidence to fire her? I am upset. I call my brilliant husband to explain the fix I am in. He suggests that I work with her to bring her behavior up to acceptable levels. Wow, imagine that! Instead of punishment, support should be given. I refuse to give a written statement but tell the manager that I will work with Kim and educate her on handling upsetting customers. He is astonished but agrees to my plea for mercy.

When I next work at the register, she does not reek of old cigarette smoke and appears less edgy. She is "vaping" to reduce her addiction to nicotine. Her need for her entitled break is still evident, but she seems more in control. I am looking for the opportunity to bring her lovingly into the fold. She is not worth my agony if I cause her harm. Eventually, the messy computer system that runs the register is replaced with the

older, more user-friendly one. I agree to try again! The new version is lovely; I can see all my choices on one screen and choose accordingly.

As I finish a sale of glassware, dishes, and door frames, I hear Kim grumble under her breath.

She swears about a customer, “She is ignorant and stupid.”

Whoa, Nelly!! I do what I promised my husband I would do. “Kim, Do Not Do That,” I growl. “You can think whatever you want; no one can read minds, but you must not say stuff like that out loud. I don’t care what kind of curse words you think, but do not utter them. You are being reported to management every time you say something rude. I am not the person ‘snitching’ on you, but you must be careful with your thoughts and language.” She looks at me, startled but does not argue or disagree. We continue to wait on customers checking out their goods as cute and messy Chris returns to her post next to Kim. My life as a crone (old woman with wisdom) is just beginning. I will see what happens next on the day of rehabilitation.

Much to my joy, the donation door becomes inundated with goods to be unwrapped and priced. I find it difficult to return to the checkout counter. Kim seems to settle into the warehouse crew. I give her cheery hellos but stay clear of the whole rehabilitation mess. I am a volunteer and try to do work where I am needed with jobs I enjoy and do well.

## 9. ROSE IN THE WAREHOUSE

Who is this new person to volunteer for Habitat for Humanity? Rose looks uncomfortable in her white, oversized men’s tee shirt as she wipes her forehead and sweats through the armpits in this September heat. The warehouse is unevenly heated

and air-conditioned, spread over its thirty-five thousand square foot enclosure. Her gray and brown hair is curly and unruly, needing some sort of styling, but her soft brown eyes are curious but wary. She is nervous and unsure of herself in this new environment; she cannot listen to the other volunteers who are trying to help her adjust.

Janet says, "Put your jacket on this peg and take a rolling cart of priced glassware to the selling floor." Rose begins to talk about how warm she is feeling and that she can't put stuff out. She is distracted and not functioning very well. I quietly walk over to her slumped posture and tell her to come with me. I will show her how I want the merchandise to be put on the shelves. She begins to protest, but I am quietly insistent that she listens to me. I want her to focus on what I am telling her so that she can calm down. We take a fully-loaded cart past the vertical flapping plastic divider, out of the intake space onto the selling floor. Carefully we place one item at a time onto the shelves giving each its proper space. She begins to relax and listen to me; I talk her through the process, calming her down.

Rose is retired from work at the county court of Morristown. She has her pension after years of service to her job and collects Social Security. She needs to get out and interact with people. Clearly, she is tired of staying at home, watching television, and feeding her cat. She wants to contribute to society but making this new transition is difficult for her. She seems to be a linear thinker who can only process one command at a time. I recognize her learning pattern, having taught the fifteen and sixteen-year-old kids who worked with me in the pharmacy. We begin to connect, and she is willing to trust me.



We became friends; I like her. She is a hard worker and will do a job fully and completely, like sorting CDs and DVDs by the hundreds on dusty shelves. She often becomes stuck in a repetitive rut and continues along those lines, unable to change direction. Sometimes she greets me at the front door to tell me we must fill the front shelves with nice, decorative objects or the warehouse manager will be upset.

“Okay, okay,” I say,” Rose calms down. We will get it done.” I just walked in and needed to sign in on the computer to get my volunteer credits. After I look over the situation, I help her ease her fears and we do what needs to be done.

Sometimes she takes all the fifty-gallon garbage pails filled with the trashed junk donated by well-meaning people to the far end of the store to be compacted and hauled away. This is heavy, menial work. Sometimes she quietly sits on a resale couch resting before she tries to help another unwitting buyer. She likes to bring out bubble wrap and newspapers for customers to wrap up their purchases.

Janet, another volunteer, sarcastically asks me if I talked to Rose. “Yes,” I tell her, “I did!” It seems that I have another talent developed over my long years as a pharmacist listening and talking people down from trees. If you quietly observe the behavior, the core need becomes apparent; the problem can be solved! Ruffled feathers can be smoothed by active listening, then assessing the kernel of annoyance. People often talk about the problem before getting to the real issue. One must listen, listen, and listen!

Today, Rose is angry at another volunteer who tells her she can’t put tags on merchandise when they are on the selling floor. She does not like to be criticized or told what to do. When I work with her, I ask her how she wants to do the task at hand and

then quietly take over the job and have her help me to complete the work. Crate and Barrel have donated curtain rods; they need to be taken out of their cardboard containers and tied together with tape, and their hardware attached to the rods. We work together cooperatively to get the job done. She listens to me, and I help her; we are a good team. Lastly, the merchandise is placed in a large upright bin, priced, and brought to the selling floor. The paid employee thanks us as we leave for the day. Tomorrow, more stuff will be donated, and we will find a way to bring it all out for the customers to buy at very small prices.

I like working with the new volunteers to help them get oriented. Some of my skills learned over the years prove useful in my new job. Mostly, I like to unwrap stuff to be priced. Long ago, my innate curiosity would get me in trouble. Now, I have harnessed the beast and used it for the good of contributing to a group effort to build houses for people needing them.

#### 10. CHALLENGED BOY WITH TEACHERS

Cold! It is a freezing morning at the Restore! February of 2022 proves to be a challenge for my fingertips and toes. After I punch in the new access code in the keypad to enter the warehouse, sign in, and take my temperature for contact tracing, I walk across the marked-up tile and concrete floor to the office at the other end of the site. The volunteer computer logs in my hours when I enter my username and password. Peter, who runs the cash register, and Katie greet me with friendly hellos. It is nice to be acknowledged as I begin my day of sorting, pricing, and evaluating donated goods for sale. I have become a trusted member of the organization. After nine months of volunteering, my hours of dedicated work are beginning to pay off!

I try to make an order from chaos as stuff gets donated at random times and in weird quantities. Sometimes, we get drinking glasses, wine glasses, and crystal trays all day in huge quantities. Sometimes, barely used pots and pans arrive at the shop. Sometimes, sets of dishes come carefully wrapped in moldy newspaper or lovely bubble wrap. Everything must be taken out of cartons and boxes to be priced for sale. I see dishes given away because the next generation does not want to care for them or set the table as the Victorians did with a special berry spoon for fruit and a small fork for salad. Every dish of fine china was valued for its opulence. The idea of fine dinings like the queens or kings has given way to casual mugs and multipurpose plates for eating. No one wants fragile dishes with gold borders that can't be put into the microwave or dishwasher for fear they won't survive. As a potter, I like to make simple, practical items used for everyday meals. I am amazed by how many things people collect in their life that have very little real value. The significance attributed to objects always astonishes me!

Today a surprise awaits me as I go through the long, plastic flaps to the back of the building where the donations are made. The manager, Charles, is talking to a lovely Chinese lady and another teacher supervising a learning-challenged boy. As I walk over to the sorting table, Charles gratefully turns these new volunteers over to me. A local school sends the teachers with the students to the warehouse to train the student as he volunteers for a couple of hours. Zach is about fifteen years old, tall and good-looking, with lovely brown hair and soft brown eyes. He seems to have a very short attention span and must be called back to work often. I explain to Lisa and Mary, his aides, that we accept housewares, books, and decorative objects.

We politely refuse bedding, clothes, electronics, and medical equipment. I show them the cardboard recycling bins where we collect cartons to be brought to the baler; they are recycled for further use. Rusted or unusable metal objects go into their own special container for the smelter who pays The Restore by the pound. The money from this operation paid for new box trucks to pick up donations. Boxes of shopping bags and bubble wrap are brought up front near cash registers for customers to pack up their purchases. Many thanks are offered to people who donate their once useful objects for resale. Tax receipts are offered for the goods. Donors bring us goods that were once very important to their lives but are no longer needed. We must respect their good intentions to keep items out of the ever-growing landfills even if the stuff is really in bad condition or no longer useful. Sentimental value is a hard issue to deal with; we always say thank you for bringing these objects to Habitat for resale, even if we must throw them away.

I explain that pricing is done so that the objects sell quickly on the floor. For example, a crystal vase that once cost fifty dollars would now be priced at four dollars because there are too many of them in the warehouse. There is no control of the stock coming in, so the price depends on volume, not value! Customers walk the warehouse daily looking for bargains for their homes or the antique market. There is a constant flow of resellers who make a few dollars on each piece by sending them to auction in Pennsylvania.

I call Zach over to the carton of objects that I placed on the table and ask him to unwrap the packages to be priced. I quietly repeated myself many times for him to follow my instructions. He absently complies, but the going is slow. His aides try to

keep him engaged in the process, especially the soft-spoken Chinese lady. We unwrap dish after dish, cup after cup, and place them in large bins to be tagged for the selling floor. The women become engaged in the process of this exploration. They comment on how cute the ceramic fairies and elves are as they unwrap them. Zach eventually wanders off with a lovely piece of red plaid ribbon to play with. I am grateful that they must soon catch their ride back to their school. I am tired of talking, explaining, and teaching. He is learning challenged.

My fellow volunteer has been watching from across the room with my attempts at patience and teaching. Ray quietly comes over to me after the teachers have left with their charge.

He says, "Sharon, you did really well! I am proud of you." Somehow, this compliment makes the morning worthwhile. Yes, I am satisfied with myself for once. I feel as though I have contributed a small bit to society. Bit by bit, dish by dish, we can all work together for a kinder, gentler world.

Every Wednesday morning, Zack and his aide return for more on-the-job training. Very few donations come into the warehouse in February; there is not much to do. I send them onto the selling floor to sort the masses of CDs to keep them busy. Each CD must be opened to be sure there is a disc inside the plastic sleeve. The CDs are put into categories on a bookshelf for people to buy. I feel a little guilty that I am relieved of my responsibility as a teacher. Eventually, contributions increase, and I am cast into the role of monitor again. I vow to be patient and kind! Zack unwrapped dishes and placed price tags on them before putting the objects on the rolling carts. This time I am more demanding; I tell him to pay attention to what I am saying! He listens and behaves better,

following my lead. Sara, his aide, takes the tagged goods on the cart to the selling floor with Zach. We repeat this process again and again until their visit runs out. Next week we will do it all over again.

I look forward to the new possibilities that the warehouse offers. Sometimes there is an overload of nasty junk donated. Sometimes the goods are the whole existence of a life well lived. Drawers of flatware, pots, and pans, cooking utensils are placed in cartons by daughters and sons of mothers moving into assisted living or going to graves. I often wonder what my collected stuff of sixty or more years will look like to a young volunteer as she unpacks a universe of living. My coveted Waterford dishes and fine Ginori china will be objects taking up space on shelves. Styles change; what was once valuable is now considered passe.

Probably, the more important issue is the interaction with multigenerational people from various walks of life. I like to teach new volunteers and interact with them. They fascinate me with their attachment to tiny items perceived as cute. I am a pragmatist at heart and place no value in nonfunctional objects. The creativity produced by artists making sculptures is great, but the mass production of these tiny cherubs and angels is overwhelmingly boring.

#### 11. RUTH AND BOB COLLECTING THINGS.

My in-laws Ruth and Bob moved from their well-loved split-level ranch house after twenty-five years in West Orange. My husband went to high school, learned to drive, and photographed this town and his friends and neighbors in this lovely moss green wood-sided home. Ruth had a garden in the backyard where she grew flowers and vegetables. In the front yard was a prized Japanese red maple tree. The house was

furnished with comfortable moss green velvet couches, green wall-to-wall carpet, and an ugly gold and black easy chair. My father-in-law had a six-foot-long cabinet for his prized stereo, along with an upright piano which he sometimes played. They transported all of their furniture to their new house.

At this time, Les and I were married about five years with two small boys to raise. Ruth, my mother-in-law asked me to help her with the move. She wanted to put my organizational skills to work. I love to arrange, organize and trash stuff. I am not a saver of things no longer needed.

Ruth said, "Sharon, can you help me to throw out some of the collected items on my basement shelves?" She had an extensive collection of empty glass bottles, wrapping paper, gift boxes from department stores, paper bags, beautiful colored ribbons, and string neatly assorted. Nothing could be wasted; it might be needed for later use. Sure, I said I could certainly help her to clean up for her difficult move to a new community two hours away from her friends and organizations. I knew that at sixty years old, picking up stakes and moving was difficult. She would not be close enough to visit her grandchildren or see her friends easily.

Ruth was a very social person who liked almost everyone, although sometimes critical but usually accepting of flaws. I can only remember one time when she spoke of another lady in the community badly. She told me to be careful with this woman because she was mean. She volunteered her time for synagogue fund-raisers and Hadassah events; she played Maj-Jong weekly with her "ladies". Ruth needed to sacrifice her established life in West Orange to follow her husband to a new job in a city two hours west. Bob, my father-in-law, had to find another position as a senior textile chemist in

Philadelphia. His chemical company was relocating to Georgia due to the tax benefits in that state. At the age of sixty, he was happy to find work as a scientist at a new company. Like most engineers and precise experts, he was critical and demanding of perfection. We often crossed swords on my use of grammar and punctuation!

I was happy to spend an afternoon helping Ruth. My mother-in-law and I were good friends. We would go on shopping trips together and she would sometimes watch my kids. We walked down the three steps to the basement shelves. She gave me a large garbage pail and I began to remove the accumulated stuff. About ten minutes into the process of cleaning up, she put out her hand and asked me to stop! "Excuse me," I stammered! "You don't want me to do this? But you asked me to help you."

Ruth said, "No, I can't bear to throw away all of this. I will take these things with me to our new house." And she did!

Twenty years later, Ruth phoned to ask me to help her pack and throw away the stuff that she had accumulated in her new house in Cherry Hill. She and Bob were moving to an assisted living apartment a few towns away. Could I drive two hours away to organize her belongings? I promptly said, no! I was not as young or stupid as I once was. She needed to take these cherished belongings with her and I could not do this. Memory loss and Alzheimer's had begun to take their toll on her. Bob felt it would be better if they lived in a more protected and caring environment. Les and I did not realize how much deterioration had taken place. She could no longer drive her car to the grocery store for fear of getting lost and confused. We saw them only occasionally on holidays and birthdays due to the distance to their home.



After they moved into their roomy two-bedroom apartment, with an eat-in kitchen, living room, and deck with sliding glass doors, Les and I came to visit. She bought new, lovely, cream-colored, soft leather couches to replace the dingy moss green velvet ones from her former home. She questioned the expense of buying new furniture at her age. I reassured Ruth that it was okay to have beautiful couches to enjoy for however long she lived. The four-foot-tall lamps from an earlier time came with them. They looked out of place with the new, modern furniture. Ruth loved these green, ornate vases with tall brass bottoms and outsized lamp shades. We lovingly called this style Brooklyn modern. She asked if I could replace the shades with better ones. Yes, of course! This would be their housewarming present. I took them to a fine lamp shop, removed the overly tall bases, took out the weights keeping them upright, and bought gorgeous, pleated silk shades to complete the new modern look. The porcelain vases looked great; they had found a new home. This expensive project was appreciated by Ruth but not by my father-in-law. When I lovingly placed these presents on the lamp tables on each side of the new cream-colored sofas, Bob exclaimed that they were not “correct”. The shades were not in proportion to the lamp bases. I was not happy! I left feeling sad and dejected. “No, good deed goes unpunished.” I had crossed a line into his authority by innocently taking control of the situation. He took the lamps to his “expert” and had the shades changed to meet his specifications. So, I learned a valuable lesson; possessions matter! He could not tolerate my intrusion into his domain. He was the expert, not I!

## CHAPTER TWO: TALES OF ANIMALS AND CHILDREN

### 1. LITTLE BIRD

The leaves rustled on the damp ground crumpled up in shades of brown and gold, sometimes shot through with vibrant crimson. The boy walked with his head down, scanning the ground for interesting pebbles or bits of junk thrown away. His messy blonde hair, scuffed sneakers, and mud-caked jeans gave him an air of not caring, but he cared a lot about many things, just not his outward appearance. He liked to think about the mechanics of electrical currents, how engines worked, and why the sky was blue; a lot of important ideas went through his ten-year-old head. He liked to walk down to the train tracks to put pennies on the rails so the mighty locomotives travelling on unguarded tracks could flatten the coins speeding along. There were no guard rails to keep Jeff away from the dangerous intersection. He especially liked to walk across the highway to buy Slurpee at the 7-11 or, better yet, candy bars to savor all the way home. Sometimes he rode his bike through the neighborhood, really fast but mostly alone. Uphills, downhill, screeching to a stop! Mostly in control but sometimes falling, getting up, and beginning again.

One day, a lady stopped his mother in the YMCA waiting area to ask if Jeff lived on Powder Mill Road. She told the mom that he had fallen off his bike in front of her car. She just missed hitting him! He did not mention this mishap. These were the days before children needed to wear protective helmets.

The rule was he could go where he wanted after school but must return home for dinner at 5:30 pm, begin his homework, then hop into bed at 10 pm. Not to sleep, oh, no!

Just to stay in bed, no toes on the floor, perhaps to read technical journals or engineering magazines. Jeff liked to ponder the universe along with his lifelong friend, Max.

Orange, furry, with big green eyes and a long-curved tail; this foundling was rescued from the garbage dump of the local nursing home. Jeff had gone with his father to see patients in elder care and sat outside the refuse area with bits of bread to lure the new kittens over to him. The mother cat had six babies and was grateful to have one of her kittens fed and taken care of by the boy. Max became Jeff's alter ego. If one looked for Max, he would be found wrapped around the boy's neck like a live boa, purring happily. The feline was a beautiful shade of orange with stripes down her side, white paws, and pools of limpid brown eyes. Of course, when the ball of meowing fur was brought home, permission had to be given to keep the foundling! How could one allow such a beautiful creature to go uncared for? Put it out into the cruel woods and let it be eaten? No, surely not!

Expensive veterinarian fees were not a concern for the boy; all he knew was that his lonely heart expanded at the sight of his cat. So, Max became part of his family, along with a younger (pesky) brother, an older (bossy) brother, a stupid beagle dog, and the usual assortment of gerbils.

On one of his walks, Jeff spied a little creature on the side of the leaf-strewn road. It made a soft chirping sound. What could possibly be so small and sweet, needing his immediate attention? His heart went out to this tiny bit of avian softness. Gray-brown with downy feathers and yellow beak, but clearly unable to fly. The wren cringed at his tentative touch but had no other choice! He carefully scooped up the bird into his grungy hands, vowing to save it from its uncertain fate. He whispered softly to his newfound

friend that he would protect it from the evils of the natural world. He cradled this tiny bit of life on his walk home then, presented it to his mother.

“Oh my, where did you find this unfortunate creature?”

He shrugged his dusty shoulders and admitted to finding it near the curb, about a block from their house.

“Please, Mom, can we keep it, help it, feed it?” As with the kittens, gerbils, and, oh, yes, the goldfish won at outdoor fairs, the bird came home to be taken care of, too.

Mom called the vet to find out what to feed a wild bird. The answer came back; wet cat food and lots of water. A shoebox was converted into a new habitat for the little one. Grass and cat food were provided, and a small saucer of water offered a bath for the creature. The lid of the box was given small air holes so as not to smother the bird. The vet warned that wild birds do not survive well even in well-meaning households, but Jeff could try to save the creature. The wren, now named “Chirpy,” made a lot of noise, continually! It chirped and chirped and chirped... non-stop. There was no way to shut the thing up! Max, the cat seemed not to notice this new intruder in his house, or so the boy thought.

A barbeque was planned for that evening at a great auntie’s house. Jeff gently cradled the shoebox house in his arms, got into the car, and brought his new friend along to the family dinner. He proudly showed off his prized possession to his aunts, uncles, and cousins. Of course, they warned him of the dangers of keeping wild animals.

Uncle Louie said, “The bird might not survive out of its natural environment, but also it might harbor ticks and other parasites.”

Grandpa Bob commanded, “Jeff, shut that thing up, or else.” He was sensitive to noise and commotion.

Grandma Ruth chimed in, “Oh, leave the boy alone. He’s just having fun!”

Dinner was a friendly affair of charred hot dogs, hamburgers, and newly shucked corn. Soda and ice cream finished off the feast. Oh yes, watermelon was served in thick, red slabs on leaky paper plates. Jeff and his brothers proceeded to take advantage of the plentiful black seeds by having a spitting contest and leaving a mess on the patio. Barbeques were such fun on a hot, buggy summer night.

Chirpy, true to his name, continued to make its irritating noise. The bird went on and on as the party progressed. Chirp, chirp, chirp! Oh my, would he never be quiet? Soon it became dark; time to return home and go to sleep. Jeff cradled his prize possession as he got into the car.

The boys showered, dressed in pajamas, and got into bed. Chirpy was given a prime place in his custom shoebox, complete with air holes punched through the cardboard by a sharp number two pencil. The bird’s new home was placed next to Jeff on his desk within easy reach of his bed. Jeff peered at the creature lovingly as he rearranged the grass in the bird’s new home. Perhaps this indicated the love and devotion that he would later indulge his own children. Chirpy still sang out his presence in the bedroom. Would he ever stop?

The next morning it was ominously quiet. Something was missing? The noise of the bird had stopped! Had it died at night? How does one explain death to a ten-year-old boy who has lost something he loves? The shoebox lid was no longer on straight; Chirpy was gone! Not a trace of its existence was to be found. No feathers, no beak, no

tiny feet! Ah, but Max, Jeff's beloved cat, looked very content with himself. It was a blessing in disguise. No burial site, no conjured-up prayers, or sadness at the fragility of life had to be explored. Instead of waiting for the bird to die a miserable death, for surely it was sick if it could not fly. The law of the wild had taken place. Max did what all hunters do; he ate his prey, licked his whiskers, and moved on to other tasty dishes. He also liked to eat small bunnies nestled under pine trees and chipmunks running for cover in the cracks of the patio.

Jeff looked forlorn, picked up Max, and gave him a good talk. "How could you do this? What is wrong with you? Are you a wild beast or something?" Max innocently looked back at his adoring boy, knowing full well he would be forgiven.

The boy did forgive his cat for doing what great hunters do, wrapped him around his neck, and continued to explore his universe with a new understanding of how life can continue after loss and tragedy. Often, animals provide the first brush with the tenuousness of life. This experience gives a hint to one's own mortality.

Max continued to comfort the boy through many trials and setbacks, always aware of the boy's need for him. He lived a good life long after the boy left him for college. He hunted chipmunks, bathed in puddles, and slept in the softest, warmest places in the house. He liked to curl up on the best living room wing chairs for a nice nap. Finally, when Jeff was no longer involved with his care, he had a stroke and died in the arms of his mistress. The burial service was a solitary one, under a large rock, near the woods where Max had hunted as a kitten. An animal's life is short and transitory but meaningful to those who love and care for them. They provide undying love and friendship while requiring very little but the need for food and shelter.

## A.A. MILNE; POEM

"Today was a Difficult Day," said Pooh.

There was a pause.

"Do you want to talk about it?" asked Piglet.

"No," said Pooh after a bit. "No, I don't think I do."

"That's okay," said Piglet, and he came and sat beside his friend.

"What are you doing?" asked Pooh.

"Nothing, really," said Piglet. "Only, I know what Difficult Days are like.

I quite often don't feel like talking about it on my Difficult Days either.

"But goodness," continued Piglet, "Difficult Days are so much easier

When you know you've got someone there for you.

And I'll always be here for you, Pooh."

It is always nice to have a friend beside you, like a dog or a cat to console you.

This poem seems to say it all!

## 2. RUFFIE DOG; THE SIBERIAN HUSKY OR DOG #1.

Ruffie was the first dog we brought into our new house. After wandering around New Jersey, moving every year or so to follow my husband's medical training, we built a four-bedroom ranch-style house with about an acre of land in Parsippany. This was our first home that wasn't a temporary stopping place. Les and I and our two small sons lived in five apartments in about as many years. Sometimes it didn't pay to unpack the cartons of books because we knew the stay was only temporary while Les finished an internship or residency program. I could not work as a pharmacist because I did not have

childcare for the boys. Actually, I was forced to take a seven-year hiatus until the children were in school. We needed a dog to complete the family constellation of a three-year-old and a new baby. What was I thinking? My brother-in-law provided us with a Siberian puppy begot on the streets of Brooklyn. His roommate's dog had sired some pups; did we want a male? Sure, sounds like a good idea - a purebred dog - free! Nothing is free in the long run! I did not research enough to understand the idiosyncrasies with this half dog and half wolf!

We welcomed a beautiful, fluffy puppy with piercing blue eyes into our already busy house of small boys. Ruffie liked to run! After all, he was a Siberian husky born to race in the wilds of Alaska. He liked to chew on my new wooden kitchen chair rails. His fur coat was so lush and heavy that he could not tolerate being in a warm house for very long, so he stayed in the garage or tied up outside most of the time. When spring arrived, he would shed his downy layer. This wonderful white fluff caught in the bushes leading up the driveway. I always meant to collect this stuff, clean it and use it to stuff throw pillows.

He loved the children but bit anyone else who tried to pet him. Also, he liked to howl endlessly at the scent of other animals, which I found very annoying. So, I began to care for this semi-wild beast which was not easy with little children to tend to. I walked him with great difficulty; he was too strong for me and couldn't feel my rebukes through his double layer of down and thick fur. I rescued him many times from neighbors' garages when he broke free and ran away. They would call me to come and get him! He did an admirable job of guarding the house and scaring away would-be robbers. Ruffie was tied to a lead at the end of the driveway; all he needed to do was to stand up and



glare at the poor postman or UPS guy to cause mad backtracking of steps to get away from this ferocious animal. I did a lot of apologizing for behaviors beyond my control. It is nearly impossible to train a dog that feels no pain and doesn't listen! Dog training takes a huge amount of patience and persistence, which I found I did not have at that time. When I acquired our third dog, I enrolled in Dog training classes at Giralda Farms in Madison to teach me how to talk to my animal and get a proper response. With this canine, I did not know how to be a proper lead dog.

One day, the dog got loose yet again. My brother-in-law was visiting, so he tried to grab the animal to help me. This caused Ruffie to bite Gerald on the hand; he needed stitches and a prescription for antibiotics. It really was not the animal's fault; he was merely frightened and reacted accordingly. The dog ran around free for a while, then came home for dinner and a nap.

For twelve years, we tolerated this beautiful but unsuitable animal in our house. One morning, my husband returned to the house after getting ready to leave for work and announced that the dog was dead!

My first reaction was, "How do you know?" Duh! A doctor usually knows when an animal is dead or alive. Ruffie had been treated with antibiotics for pneumonia the month before and had recovered.

"Okay," I said, "We will call the vet to take the body away and bury him?" No, my husband handed me a pickax and a shovel to dig the grave in our wooded backyard to bury a forty-five-pound, furry beast. The ground is full of rocks, and it is difficult to create a large enough space. We dragged the large, dead carcass over to the area, and I continued to cover my friend up with earth. Lastly, I placed a large boulder over the site

so that another animal would not dig him up. My loving spouse could not stay to help because he was late for work. I dug, and I cried, and I dug, and I cried over the loss of life of this difficult but beautiful animal. When I was done burying my challenging but loving friend of twelve years, I had exhausted my grief and was ready to come to terms with my loss. Then my youngest son came home from school. He was about ten years old. Ruffie had come to our house before Michael was born. He loved the dog and wanted to know where he was so he could play with him. I showed Michael the burial site, placed another large stone on the mound, and recited the bread prayer in Hebrew. All I could remember at that moment was the prayer thanking God for bringing forth bread from the earth... not correct, but it was all I had at the moment. It worked, and we got on with our lives until the next dumb dog!

One winter, we took the whole family skiing to Steamboat Springs, Colorado. Besides skiing in fresh, powdery snow in a dry climate with low humidity, there were side trips to be explored. Michael found a trip to the Continental Divide with the aid of twelve Siberian Huskies on a dog sled led by an expert Musher. He begged to go on this adventure. His brothers and father were not interested, so he convinced me to take him on an exploration of the wilds of Colorado. The musher picked us up in his truck and brought us to the site where the dogs were ready to be hooked up two by two to the sled. Michael got in the back with the leader, and I got zipped into the seat in front. The musher yelled for the dogs to start running. We were about one hundred yards ahead on the trail when the beasts found some roadkill. They veered off the track in a mixed-up jumble of dogs to satisfy their curiosity. Michael and the musher got off the back of the sled and tried to reassemble the dogs so that we could continue our journey. They were

having a difficult time getting the leads straightened out. I reluctantly got up from my snug seat to help out. I grabbed the nearest dog, Snowball, and smacked her with the side of my leg to make her pay attention. I knew from experience with Ruffie that she could not feel much of this impact. She looked at me, sat down in place, and waited patiently for her master to put her in line.

I had the guilty thought that, “Oh, my, I have just beat a prize-winning Iditarod runner.” The man said nothing to me. I ran alongside the sled to the Continental Divide, then got back into the warm zipped-up compartment to return to the truck.

When we were on her way back to the drop-off site, the musher said, “Lady, you know something?” Oh, boy, here it comes; he will let me have it for beating his dog. Instead, he said, “You have the right instincts! You should be a musher!” Of course, I was flattered, but I told him that we don’t have dog races in New Jersey.

The conversation continued on the discipline of children and dogs. He was on the side of correct behavior, having witnessed a lot of bratty kids on his tours.

### 3. THE FREE CAMP GERBILS

Did I mention that nothing is really ever free? At the end of the summer, my oldest son, Andrew, came home from camp with a wonderful surprise! He had won the opportunity to take home four gerbils. We were thrilled to have these new additions to our home. We went to the pet store and bought a cage, some gerbil food, and bedding for these cute little creatures. They romped, ate, pooped - a lot - in their cage and on my hands, and generally amused us. We bought clear, colored plastic tubes that connected to make a huge playpen so the little critters would not get bored. They also pooped in these clear, colorful tubes while scurrying up and down and around. It was very difficult to

keep this habitat clean. If you took the pets out of the cage to play, they usually got loose and created a minor panic until they could be collected and safely put back in their now clean haven.

Michael, his youngest brother, wanted to play with the little creatures. He tried to take one of the gerbils out of its cage so he could feel its soft fur and cuddle with it. He did not have his brother's permission to touch them, but he was curious. As he was trying to remove one of the critters, another one attempted its escape. He panicked and slammed the lid down on the escaping rodent. The lid crushed the spine of the gerbil. Michael came crying to me that one of the gerbils attacked the other and killed it. I was horrified that we had an attack gerbil in our cage. In my righteous indignation, I removed the culprit and sent him off to the woods to be eaten by wild animals. Michel lived with this lie for about two years until he finally came clean. I am sure his guilt at telling a lie and hurting an animal ate at his conscience. When he finally told the truth, he was greatly relieved. No one cared anymore!

About three weeks into this adventure in wildlife husbandry, we heard a bit of squeaking in the corner of the cage; out popped three tiny, red-bodied baby gerbils about the size of an adult thumb. I found used cages to house the babies from friends. I began to realize the multiplying capabilities of rodents. Every three weeks, no matter how fast I separated them, they produced more tiny babies. I knew better than to trust two gerbils together for more than three minutes. We found good homes for some of our new additions with friends and relatives. These furry little creatures continued to reproduce until the next summer when twenty-three of them were returned to the nature tent. With

a smile on my face, I delivered my son and his wiggling, squirming friends in a shoebox back to their place of origin. Lesson learned; never trust a gerbil to remain celibate!

Years later, when Jeffrey (my middle son) went to college, he was lonely. In sophomore year, Jeff came home with two certifiable male gerbils. He assured me there would not be the plenitude of offspring seen with the free camp gerbils. He bought these little guys in a pet shop. Of course, it is difficult to tell the sex of these rodents. The little sweeties proceeded to multiply. Jeff left them with me when he returned for the winter semester. He was not lonely anymore; he had a new girlfriend. He assured me that I could sell them at a pet shop for a dollar or two. I was not going to buy more cages, food, and supplies for pets I did not want. I packed them up and took them to the nearest toy store/ pet shop. The merchant looked at my cage of living rodents. He growled at me, "What do you want?" Timidly (not asking for money), I asked to leave the animals in their cage for him. He ungraciously told me to leave them on the counter and stalked away. These pets were not in high demand and probably became snake food.

My experience with mice and other rodents dates back to my days in the pharmacology lab in college. We were put in groups of four, with one female to every four males. The guys were very squeamish about picking up the mice to inject them with long or short-acting drugs. I knew our lab grade depended on doing this activity. If the lab animals were not handled properly, they would bite you with their sharp, nasty teeth. I braved the correct pick-up with my thumb against the mouse's back and gave the shot. The boys in my group followed, not allowing a girl to show them up! If the mouse got his sharp incisor into your hand, the best way to detach it was to fling it overhead. You

could hear the student shouting, “Flying mouse, overhead”! This was not exactly humane behavior, but the bite hurt.

No one will ever convince me that gerbils, mice, and guinea pigs are proper pets and not merely rodents,

#### 4. THE GOLDFISH THAT WENT FOR A WALK

Every spring, the elementary school my children attended had an outdoor festival on the parking lot with games for the children to play, such as bean bag toss and penny throws. The parents would cook hot dogs and hamburgers on a charcoal grill to be placed on airy white bread rolls topped with sugary catsup or bland yellow mustard. One year I volunteered to bring the fixings for a salad bar, which was not well received. There was always plenty of popcorn and candy to be enjoyed by the sugar-loving children. Cans of soda finished the non-nutritive menu. This event was usually a fundraiser to supply some books or extras for the children in our public school. In addition to donating food for the day, the parents bought tickets for the games the kids played. The tickets were curled up in circular bundles with perforations. The deal was offered to buy one ticket at a time or to buy ten tickets for a better bargain. The kids were delighted to be at school with games and junk food to amuse them.

One of the attractions was a ping pong ball tossed into small round fishbowls of water. For a few tickets, the child could hope to win a goldfish swimming in one of these glittering orbs. The small glass bowls were filled with water with one fish per unit. Of course, my son wanted to win a fish. The golden color glittering in the sun with the rapid circling of the fish was a siren’s call to a small boy. Jeff tossed the small, opaque ball in the direction of the globe, but it bounced off! Each unsuccessful attempt at fish

ownership costs more tickets. By the time he was done, I could have bought an army of fish and a tank to house the cuties. He tried again and again. On the third try, he won his much-desired prize. We were given the fish in a small plastic bag filled with water and tied with a knot at the top. Grinning from ear to ear, Goldie returned to a house of three boys, two cats, and a dog.

This was a lovely pet that required very little care. This was a lovely pet that one could not caress. No hair was on the sofa or pee sinking into the throw rugs to clean up. I sprinkled goldfish food into the small glass bowl, placed little colored pebbles on the bottom, and changed its water once a week. This arrangement often failed to keep the fish alive because the water did not have enough oxygen to maintain its life. I have childhood memories of my “Goldie” jumping out of her jar onto my desk only to die. I was horrified at discovering my coveted dead goldfish; I was scarred for life! This little guy did not have to wait long for its demise.

I carefully placed the small, round bowl with Goldie high on a bookshelf in the family room. The space was near the ceiling to protect it from Max, the orange striped cat who was Jeff’s alter-ego. One night, my husband returned home after a long day at the office to greet the family fish. The fish received the first hellos before me. Les asked me where the fish was; he was not swimming in his little bowl. I sarcastically answered that I had taken Goldie for a walk around the block, and it had not returned home for the evening. I don’t know; where was Goldie? Our beloved hunter cat had a smile as wide as the Cheshire cat’s on his face. Apparently, he had managed to climb up the bookcase and slide his flexible paw into the jar just between the shelf and the rim to nab a tasty dinner for himself. One small drop of water remained on the shelf as evidence! No

future burial was needed for the short but happy life of this pet. We might have viewed Goldie as a pet by Max saw a snack.

#### 5. ANOTHER FREE DOG; THE BEAGLE

Did I mention that a free dog is never free? After the Siberian husky died, we were left dog less. Andrew, Jeffrey, and Michael wanted another dog. I still had not learned my lesson about free animals. My friend lived on a large estate in Sparta and loved Beagles. She housed two females and a male in her barn. She decided to breed the females hoping one would get pregnant and supply her with cute baby Beagles. Now, this breed is very docile and dumb, and untrainable. They were often used as lab animals because of their tameness and passivity. Both females got pregnant and produced twelve puppies between them. Jean wanted the children and me to come and see these beautiful, soft puppies with big brown eyes and long, silky ears. It is not humanly possible to fondle newborn pups and not fall in love with the sheer beauty of creation. They lick your nose, curl up in your arms and pull at your heartstrings. Didn't we come just to look at these darlings? Just to look...wrong! One does not passively gaze at wiggling, scampering, adorable babies without giving in to the pleading and begging of delighted children. We picked the most beautiful puppy with enormous sienna eyes encircled with dark brown eyeliner. My husband assured me that she would photograph well, and he would help to care for her. So, we began a new era of peeing on the floor, howling at strangers, chewing wooden chair rails, and running away from home.

Maggie, the Beagle was a pack animal and loved her pack of boys dearly but did not like me very much; the feeling was mutual. She was a very docile animal that liked to sleep at the foot of one of the boys' beds. She was easy to walk on a leash but loved to



run free to chase squirrels and chipmunks, even if it meant crossing the street or going into neighbor's yards. Since I did not know how to train her to stay on our property or understand her boundaries, we installed an electronic fence. When she crossed the invisible line, her electrified collar gave her a mild shock. A normal dog, not as driven by instinct responses, would have stopped at the boundary but not this dumb dog! Once she crossed the electrified line and received a shock, she would not return home.

I had to get into my car to find her somewhere in the neighborhood to try to lure her back. Sometimes Maggie would stay out all night howling and annoying my neighbors. One of my neighbors called Animal Control because she was such a nuisance. She was caught and taken to doggie prison. My neighbor's daughter tried to catch Maggie to prevent the warden from taking her away, but he was adamant that this dog must be punished for her bad behavior. I had to go to the pound, pay a fine and register her with the town. (I had forgotten to do this.)

As the years went by, one by one, her pack went off to college, leaving me to care for this beast that liked to wander the neighborhood, wailing and causing a fuss. Finally, my husband took pity on me and found Maggie a new home with a family with a fenced-in yard and a son that needed constant companionship. The boy was in a wheelchair and enjoyed her company. She lived for another two years in this idyllic situation.

Beagles are beautiful but very difficult to train. The next time I brought a dog into the house, I researched the character of the breed with its needs for being able to stay at home or run or listen to simple commands.

## 6. NOT A FREE DOG; THE SCHNAUZER

I was no longer dog dumb! I wanted a dog that I could love and that would, in turn, love and listen to me. My daughter-in-law was driving home to Indiana to visit her mother. She asked if she could bring me back a dog from one of the breeders in Ohio. Richelle and I emailed back and forth for a week as she searched the ads for a suitable canine.

“Did I want a lap dog? Did I want a tiny dog? Did I want a runner? How big, what color, how smart? she asked.

She brought a small, white female Schnauzer that was to become the love of my life. Fifi was about two pounds when she was hand-carried by Richelle in her car with her large Dalmatian companion for twelve hours from the Midwest. I immediately fell in love! She was the runt of the litter. The breeder could barely sell her as she was his favorite puppy.

The next step was to learn how to talk to my dog so that we could understand each other. At six months old, I signed up for doggie classes at St. Hubert's Giralda. She was no longer considered a puppy but an adolescent...oh, well! For six Saturday mornings, we learned “sit,” “stay,” “come,” and “wait.” This effort was exhausting but well worth the time and energy spent. I taught Fifi how to stay in her yard with no electronic devices and sit when told to do so in the house and outside. Dogs don't generalize, I learned, so she must be taught the commands in the house and out of the house. I learned to praise the good behaviors and disregard the bad ones. I really should have learned this concept earlier for bringing up my kids...better late than never!

She occasionally peed on the floor but usually liked to wander around the yard by herself and into the woods before returning home from her daily jaunt. She slept curled up in the bend of my knees at night, sighing if I dared to displace her by moving. Fifi weighed about twelve pounds, so I could not put her in a shoulder bag and go shopping at the mall with her. She was too heavy! She was a good dog, liked to play with children, and kept me company. Fifi kept tabs on me and always knew when to curl up next to me when I read or watched TV.

She was about twelve years old when she began to act “funny.” She had no energy, slept a lot, and began pooping in the house. The vet prescribed antibiotics and prednisone to treat her condition. She acted normal but began to slow down. The vet did a blood test, but when I called for the results, the technician told me I had to return because they had broken the tube. This was not usual. I should have been suspicious!

On a beautiful November day, my husband and I visited our three grandchildren in Andover, Massachusetts. Kristina, our daughter-in-law is a vet. I asked her to take Fifi to her practice for examination and blood tests. Kristina came home looking shocked and sad.

She said, “You have a very sick dog.” Her hemoglobin was at a level of six when it should have been twelve to fourteen. She had a large sarcoma (cancer) covering the whole right side of her body. Her breathing was labored and slow.

Kristina asked, “What did we want to do? We could prolong her life with prednisone, wait for her to die, or euthanize the dog. I cried. My husband cried. She slept beside me on my pillow as I listened to her shallow breathing. The next morning, I

went with Kristina to her office, held my beloved animal, and watched her go quietly. She was a good friend even up to the very end.

We came home on Sunday. I thought I could hear Fifi in the house scampering around, asking to go out...she was gone. Wednesday morning, I went to the pound to rescue a dog. I was miserable without Fifi. The shelter would not let me have any of the dogs but said I could order a “concierge” dog. For ninety-nine dollars, they would find a suitable animal for me. I left the shelter, drove across the street, and bought a dog. Julie, the Maltese-Dachshund, began my next chapter of dogitude.

What I have learned about animals is they give unconditional love. They are difficult to train. They pee and poop all over, chew stuff up, and give love, love, and love! I would not have missed a second of my engagement with the birds, the dogs, and the gerbils. Animals are part of the growing up process for children. They teach us that we are only human, and we miss the critters when they are gone. Loss is a necessary lesson to learn in life. Animals provide a preview of the ultimate process of parental loss. How we face death teaches us how to live and survive in an impermanent world. We must look into the abyss and come out whole, willing to forge on for all life’s possibilities and challenges. I will always remember FIFI with fondness, but I miss a lot of people and animals.

#### 7. GRANDDAUGHTERS FOR THE WEEK; DO YOU LIKE GUINEA PIGS?

Yael, ten years old and Batya, eight years old are coming for a mid-winter break from private school while my son, daughter-in-law, and their older kids go skiing in Vermont. I am so excited! My husband, Leslie, and I go to Costco, a supermarket where I usually have a temper tantrum because the tantalizing foods are packaged in family-

sized quantities, not befitting two people. I love to try new dishes, but service for twelve of something untasted is a bit much to buy and then throw away. But now my granddaughters are coming to stay for the week! I buy kosher shredded cheese, soy sausages, English muffins, all Colombian coffee (Costco brand), and chocolate ice pops for their visit in massive quantities.

Yael texts me, “Can I bring my support guinea pigs to your house?” What is a “support” guinea pig?

She responds, “If I get sad or lonely, they help me to feel better.” Sure, shouldn't a ten-year-old have a buffer against depression? Heather, her mother, is a social worker, so the language of this kid seems a little odd, but ok, why not? These “critters” live in an enclosure about four feet by eight feet for the pair. I ordered a proper pen for them from Amazon and put it together in the center of the family room floor in front of the coffee table. The little rodents will have thirty-two feet of living space.

On Saturday night after sundown, the fur babies and my granddaughters arrive with their clothes, books, toys, and animals. Yael's soft brown hair and big brown eyes complement her cream-colored short-sleeved tee-shirt, tiered cotton skirt decorated with multi-colored rick rack, and bare legs. Winter weather is not a consideration for her clothing choices. Stripe, the black and white guinea pig, and Shalom, the white rodent, are gently placed in their temporary new home. Their water bottles are filled, hay or Timothy grass spread on the green canvas floor of the enclosure. Hollowed-out pillow beds complete their luxurious living arrangement. The little animals squeak and chirp their happiness, scurry around inspecting their new digs, then finally snuggle inside their cozy, hollow pillow sleepers to doze off.

My dog, Julie, a Maltese-dachshund mix, ignores the guinea pigs but constantly wants the attention of the little girls. She places her nose under the willing hands of Yael who strokes her fur and scratches her ears. In the morning, Batya feeds hay to the animals; being a natural product, it comes with its own set of little critters; ANTS! Thousands of tiny-weeny ants swarm the handmade pink pottery dish of dry dog food. I calmly look for the bug spray to demolish these pests! They are not a welcome addition to this holiday stay.

The critters are not potty trained; they poop inch-long, fat brown rods all over the new green enclosure. The girls assure me that it is okay to clean their environment once a week, but I cannot stand to look at this yucky stuff in the center of our family room. So, with damp paper towels in hand, I scoop up the mess as best as I possibly can. The poop smells!

Sunday morning begins clear and cold with a lovely coating of slippery ice on our ninety-foot-long downhill driveway leading to the garage of our house. Perfect for sliding down on fast-moving foam sleds.

I ask, "Where are your mittens, hats, and snow pants?" I am informed that they have not packed them in their many bags of stuff brought to Grandma and Grandpa's house. I wait for ten o'clock to go on a shopping trip to Kohl's to buy these much-needed items. It is only twenty degrees outside; too cold for cute cotton skirts and tee shirts and bare legs. Yael informs me that she is not cold and doesn't need leggings. I counter her argument with the fact that the cold air causes chafing and dry skin. She agrees to dress warmly. Oh, my! We outfit the girls with warm leggings, adult-sized mittens - no child sizes are left - headbands with bunny ears, and warm coats.

After lunch, Yael and Batya careen down the driveway at breakneck speeds and tumble over at the bottom. They are screaming with glee and having a great time! I am pleased to watch such uninhibited joy. A minor downside to this event happens when my feet slide out from underneath me, and I land with a nasty thud at the top of the driveway. My black and blue bruise resembles an eggplant ready for slicing, but I don't break a hip.

At bedtime, I read stories and get the children ready for bed. Dr. Seuss' *Green Eggs and Ham*, as well as *Horton Hears a Who*, are usually favorites. Yael says she needs a drug called Valerian to fall asleep. She announces that she is an insomniac. Really, a ten-year-old has insomnia?

Yes, she says," Sometimes I stay up until five in the morning!" I buy into this story.

When I check with my son later in the week, he says," Yes, I must address this issue." Yael's eighteen-year-old brother stays up all night studying, and she hears him and wants to play with him. She goes to bed just fine with no drug on board for the rest of the week. My objection to this "nothing" herb stems from making this a continual pattern needed to go to sleep.

Monday has no drama; breakfast is eaten, clothes are put on, and teeth are brushed. We go to the pottery studio for a private hand-building class with a lovely upbeat teacher who teaches Yael and Batya how to make coil pots from clay. The clay is rolled into snakes and piled up to create round cylinders. They spend two hours happy and content, creating masterpieces to be fired and glazed. On the way home, we stopped at Trader Joe's to pick out cereal, fruit, and chicken for dinner. After baths and stories,

the children want to talk to their mother, who is in Vermont skiing. Yael begins to cry hysterically; she misses mommy and wants her to come home.

The histrionics accelerate to epic proportions. Batya begins to cry and carry on, also. I feel terrible! What have I done wrong? When they call their mother and say their tearful goodbyes, I calmly ask what the problem could be. After listening to their outpouring of sadness and misery, I tell the girls that they make me feel really bad.

“Oh, it’s not your fault,” Yael says. “We just want everyone to be at your house together, and we are sad when you are not at our house.” Oh, well, I try to make them happy. The next night I asked them if they would have a repeat performance when they call their mother. No, they seem to have gotten out all their angst. They sleep cuddled together and look forward to a breakfast of jelly beans.

Yes, these sugar-loving children are allowed to have spoonfuls of multi-colored jellybeans as their pre-breakfast snack at Grandma's house. In about an hour, they ask for the customary cereal and milk for a more balanced start to the day. As a grandmother, I can take liberties with their nutrition; their mother can supervise better eating habits when they return home!

Tuesday, we drove to Michael's craft shop to buy yarn and toys for the afternoon activities. Batya learns to slip knot yarn in endless snakes of purple and blue that need to be coiled into a doll rug. Yael weaves a horsetail into an endless length that needs to be sewn into something useful later. Tiny pieces of a puzzle of a Christmas village with houses, puffs of smoke, and a decorated tree are placed on the coffee table for all of us to assemble over the next few days. Unfortunately, half of the puzzle is a monotone soldier



blue with a few white dots for stars. We do what we can! Some of the pieces are actually missing from the box.

Yael informs me that she wants to be a scientist like her Grandma but hates math.

“Oh, no,” I say! “It does not work that way; science and math go together.” She has a problem understanding long division and has gotten a bad grade. She tells me the teacher is mean to her! I have heard this complaint from my children; it is not true. She has not done her work!

I asked her to show me the new way she was taught. The teacher gave the kids a step process to learn how to divide; “Daddy” = divide, “mother” = multiply, “son” = subtract, then “Rover” = repeat. First, she must learn the pneumonic then the process. We practiced for a while until I realized her multiplication skills were not good. So, I begin to drill her on the “times” tables at various times during the day until she becomes more comfortable with the learning. I give her memory tricks for multiplying to make the process simpler.

Batya needs to understand how to tell time with a clock; I show her the little hand, count by fives, and then look at the big hand. The second graders learn time, and the fourth graders learn long division. I remember doing this with my kids not so long ago. We practice at various times during the afternoon until they “get” it. Yael decides I should be her teacher because she begins to learn the times table. Of course, this is one on one learning at its finest.

Wednesday looms, brilliantly cold and sunny; too cold to go to the playground with the sliding pond, swings, and climbing toys. Now, I remember my days of frustration, stuck in the house with small children, and beginning to long for my solitary

days of volunteering, pottery, and Pilates. I am beginning to get “cabin fever”! I need to get out! We go to the Habitat for Humanity Restore warehouse for a walk through the thirty-five-thousand-foot space for an airing. The girls are fascinated by the immensity of the site. They do not know what a warehouse is; I introduce them to my co-workers and show them the furniture, glassware, and books available for sale. The children’s books are fifty cents each. *The Five Little Peppers and How They Grew*, as well as *Peter and the Wolf*, came home with us to be read the next day. I had forgotten how lovely the music of Prokofiev is as well as the charming story. The book charts the hero’s quest of Peter in the woods of Russia. He goes out into the forbidden forest and tames the fearful wolf. The music gives each one of the characters a “voice.” The flute is the bird’s music, the oboe is the bad wolf, and other characters are signified by their instruments.

Finally, Thursday brings an end to their vacation at Grandma’s. After dinner, Grandpa and I load the kids, shopping bags, overnight bags, Guinea pigs, hay, water bottles, snuggle beds, and art projects into the Subaru. I am grateful for the times spent with the kids but am looking forward to time alone.

Fondly, I look back on my time as a full-time mother with three growing boys, but I am happy that I have the time for new activities now. Little kids take a lot of time and patience.

## 8, THERE IS A MOUSE IN MY HAIR.

The wonderful aroma of a roasting turkey perfumes the air at my son and daughter-in-law’s house for the Thanksgiving holiday. Kristina cooks brown rice, sweet potatoes, cranberry sauce, bread stuffing, green bean salad, and many desserts, including pumpkin pie, for our visit to the November eating fest. On this fall harvest holiday, we

remember the Pilgrim's near starvation when they landed at Plymouth, running from English prisons on an overcrowded wooden ship. This genuinely American holiday has all the hallmarks of a national epidemic of gluttony. The remembered history is one of sharing a festive meal with the indigenous people rather than the fact that the Indians living in the area helped new settlers to keep them from starvation. The rag-tag Pilgrims were running away from religious persecution and were ill-prepared for life in a new land. They did not have the tools for farming and did not understand the cold New England climate. They were dressed in rags, not the top hat, wide buckle belts, and expensive shoes of Hallmark card images.

My husband and I drive to Andover, Massachusetts, for six annoying traffic-congested hours to celebrate this lovely holiday to be with our three grandchildren. When Les and I arrive, we are tired and cranky from the massive bumper-to-bumper traffic. We stay in a nearby motel when we visit instead of their lovely home. By nine at night, the noise and squabbling of three kids become hard to endure. We have become used to the quiet of the two of us and a small dog.

It is good to visit with our grandson, who is fifteen years old and is on the autism spectrum; he greets us with hugs and questions about our journey. The middle child, two years younger, is thirteen and goes to her room to talk to her friends on the computer. Her peer group is far more interesting than her grandparents. The youngest child is nine years old and greets us warmly. Of course, we bring presents such as puzzles, watercolor paints, and craft projects. The children like to use acrylic paint on cardboard models of pigs, cars, and horses bought at Michael's craft store. Sara wants to string beads on yarn

to make colorful necklaces. Sofi crafts tiny beads on wires to make dangling earrings. Filip asks to play chess on his new traveling Chess board.

The children have a surprise for us. Sofie and Sara have begged their parents for new pets. The gray cat Minnie is the usual attraction! She is a sweet animal that comes and goes when she likes. Now, they have two white mice to interest them. The large, elaborate dollhouse that I gave the girls as a gift has been closed in with Lucite paneling to house these small creatures. As a child, I would have loved to have a real dollhouse for a Revlon doll. Instead, I built habitats out of leftover shoe boxes lined with soft fabric. The mice scurry about, sniffing here and there in their humble abode. Sofi brings one of the little rodents out for me to inspect; she puts one in my hands as it promptly poops. I give the critter back to her; she accuses me of being fearful of the creature. I am certainly not afraid of mere rodents! In pharmacy school, the required course in pharmacology required handling mice to give them injections of toxic drugs. We were instructed to give LD50s or a lethal dose of fifty percent to see their effect. This worthless lab procedure had three male students in my group. I handled the nasty creatures. Sometimes they sank their sharp, pointy teeth into my fingers if I was not careful to hold them correctly. My grade depended on my bravery! No, I was not afraid, merely annoyed at having to play with rodents. Yes, they are soft and furry and require very little care, but yuck!

Then Sofi puts the mouse in Sara's beautiful, curly brown hair. She shrieks with delight, jumps up and down, and demands that it be taken off her! Then Sara plops the mouse in Sofi's hair, and the screaming begins again. They are having fun tormenting each other until I offer to feed the critters to the disinterested cat. Even my dog walks

away in disbelief. I won't get the grandmother of the year award for patience and tolerance. Finally, the girls put the tiny animals back in their luxurious two-story doll house for a while, and the screaming stops!

On our next visit a year later, the kids lost interest. There is only one mouse left. The other one died or escaped or something. The beautiful dollhouse will be cremated due to the high poop content inside. I offered to adopt a dog for the kids, but their mother objected because it would be too much work. My dog does take a lot of attention and care; I must feed her and let her out to poop and pee, but she returns endless love and companionship. Julie always knows where I am in the house. She likes to sit beside me when I read or watch television while I scratch her ears. I am never lonely when she cuddles up near me. I need a dog to comfort me; the extra care and work are well worth the effort. My son tries to convince me that the mice have personalities, but I cannot begin to fathom this foreign concept. For me, they will always be lab animals.

## CHAPTER THREE: PHARMACY YEARS

### 1. THE MAKING OF A PHARMACIST: EDUCATION

At the age of seventeen, I graduated from a mediocre high school in Paramus, New Jersey. My father, who was a guidance counselor, suggested that I go to pharmacy school because the field was opening up to women students in the late sixties. Career opportunities for women up to that point were secretaries if one could type well, teachers for elementary students, or nurses. My parents discouraged me from aspiring to be a physician because they thought that it would be difficult to be a mother and have such a demanding profession. Also, they did not have the funds to pay for medical school. I applied to the University of Connecticut Pharmacy School, Rutgers, and Columbia University. I was advised to attend Columbia University, College of Pharmacy because I could save money by commuting to New York City. Also, my father had gotten a Master's degree from Columbia on the G.I. Bill when the school opened its rolls to Jews and returning soldiers during Eisenhower's presidency. Yes, I was a legacy, and my parents wanted to brag about their smart daughter. Rutgers College of Pharmacy was still in Newark at that time and was at the center of the race riots of the sixties. My father felt that if I went to school in Connecticut, I would not come back home to New Jersey. He was probably right. Columbia was one of the most expensive schools in the country, but the solution was to apply for Health Science Service Loans for the tuition. So, every year for five years, I went to the local bank and signed on the dotted line for enough money to pay for school. Five years of college loans became my dowry for my future husband. These loans were to be repaid with interest within a period of ten years after graduation.

In my fifth year of university, I applied for a scholarship of nine hundred dollars. I was granted this princely sum; when I saw the check, I sat down and cried because I thought it was another tuition bill.

I began commuting to the city to attend school on Sixty-Eighth Street and Columbus Avenue near Lincoln Center. The bus ride should have only taken a half hour from Route Seventeen in Paramus but could actually soak up an hour or more if the Lincoln Tunnel was jammed with cars or if the weather was rainy or snowy. If the bus was full and had no more seats, I would have to stand up, hanging on the overhead railing, balancing my supply of textbooks for the day. Often, as the bus crept, I would count the lights in the tunnel to pass the time until we arrived at the terminal at Eighth Avenue and Fortieth Street. Then, I could take the Seventh Avenue subway to Seventy-Second Street or walk the dozen or so block to school. Yes, I was always tired from the commute and the demanding classes. In my fourth and fifth years, I lived in dorms on the main campus at 116th street; I thought I had died and gone to heaven!

On the first day of orientation, the students were told to look to the right and look to the left because those students would not survive the five-year biology, chemistry, and pharmacy program. The main auditorium was a large theater arrangement with seats raked to the back and floor-to-ceiling windows on the sides. The pharmacy school was one hundred years old when I attended classes. The class of freshmen was made up of one hundred ten students; only ten of those were women. I should have been afraid, but I was not. The curriculum was preset until our fourth year when we could take electives.

With great joy, I went to Barnes and Noble on Eighteenth Street to purchase my textbooks for my freshman year. Basic chemistry, Trigonometry/ Calculus, English, and

Philosophy were the mandatory courses. I scouted the busy bookstore to search in the piles of texts for my wonderful, creamy, fragrant tomes that were to begin my career in pharmacy. I loved the feel of the heavy books with the glossy printed pages; I still remember the sensation of opening a new text for the sheer pleasure of being enveloped by the possibilities offered. Many of the boys in my class had attended Bronx Science, Stuyvesant, or other high-powered city schools and were far ahead of my meager forays into math and science, but I studied and passed with good grades.

The second year brought new challenges; Physics and Organic chemistry were required classes. I passed Physics with lectures at Columbia's engineering school but failed Organic Chemistry. This combination of intensive learning separated the men from the boys or, in my case, the women from the girls. I did not understand that every word from the professor's mouth was to be memorized at once to build on the incoming knowledge. Until that moment, I could study for midterms and finals at the end to learn the material. My study skills needed an important tweaking; memorize, memorize, memorize, at once! I repeated the class in my junior year and received an "A." The professor wanted to help me during the final exam, but I no longer wanted her help! She had not reached out to me when I failed her class; now, she wanted to be of assistance? This experience drummed into my head the obsessive need to stay on top of things, never letting small details go unnoticed. Prancing and gallivanting around the city were curtailed by the constant need to study and memorize. The lure of Lincoln Center and the wonderful New York museums would have to wait until college was over. Sometimes I walked around with heavy, dense books to remind me of the discipline to study.



In my third year, Physical Chemistry was part of the core curriculum. This course was taught by a semi-conscious, dreamlike new professor who liked to smoke pipes and wear baggy tweed jackets with suede elbow patches. He offered up his topic in a haphazard way, with too much dependence on advanced calculus. (Simultaneous equations) We did not know enough calculus to understand the equations he wrote on the dusty chalkboard. I was determined not to fail again; I visited his smoky office after every class to understand the esoteric material offered on the kinetics of molecules. He eventually taught me all the material that I needed to pass the final exam with an acceptable “C” grade. More than half of the class failed this course. One of the guys, angry that I had passed, asked me if I had slept with the professor; I was insulted and horrified. If someone asked me that insolent question today, I would answer, “No, I would have gotten an A.”

During the school year, I worked in community pharmacies as a clerk on weekends. One of the jobs I had was from six p.m. to three a.m. Saturday evenings. This made my mother crazy! She always wanted me to be escorted to my car at the end of my shift; of course, I told her that happened-nope! Often, I worked with a female pharmacist who owned the store. Some nights before going fishing, guys would come into the shop to buy condoms. These taboo items were kept in a drawer behind the pharmacy counter marked “Sporting goods.” The poor man would look nervously around for a male to ask for this product; finding none, he would have to mumble out his request to me, a young woman. Eventually, as times changed and sex became more of an open topic, the Sheiks and Ramses and others were displayed on hanging racks with the everyday sundry items. My education as a pharmacist was more than book learning; it required dealing with real

people and their needs. I remember the first time I had to write the word vaginal on a prescription label with a male pharmacist helping me. It took me a couple of tries to type the offending word correctly. We did not say such things back in the day!

When I moved into a dorm in New York in my fourth year, I needed a job to buy food and subway tokens. I answered an ad on the pharmacy school bulletin board for part-time work on Madison Avenue and Sixty-Eighth Street. The person hiring did not like my qualifications, but I continued walking into every pharmacy I found on the way back to One hundred Tenth Street, where I caught the bus to go to my dorm at Saint Luke's nursing school. When I got back, one of the stores called to offer me the job for Friday nights and Saturday afternoons. I was so excited to be able to support myself without asking for money from my parents. My job was to sell cosmetics and sundries in a mom-and-pop store to wealthy New York socialites. The owners treated me like one of their daughters, often taking me out to dinner. Candy bars were often my lunch, so they thought I was hungry and graciously fed me.

The highlight of the fourth year of pharmacy school was a course called Pharmacognosy. This class was the study of plant sources of medications. An example is the use of Digitalis or the plant commonly known as foxglove. It is a poisonous species of a flowering plant in the plantain family. It is commonly found in Europe and North America. It is the original source of heart medicine called digoxin. The students had to memorize the plant, its chemical components, and its medical uses. My roommate and I stayed up all night memorizing page after page of this esoteric material to pass the exams. Debbie had gotten copies of old tests from the fraternity guys so we would know what to study. The professor was very impressed with my grade and offered me extra lab

work synthesizing Borage from *Borago Officinalis*. This meant setting up glass tubes to collect the tiny bit of extract gotten from boiling these weeds in benzene. I was “high” on toxic benzene for a whole semester!

The fifth year finally allowed us to learn to compound. This course was offered over two semesters with a total of nine credits granted. Failing this class was automatic suicide!

The students made liquid suspensions, tablets, and compounded drugs into ointments and creams. We were given more than we could possibly accomplish in a lab period and were timed. Some of the men brought pre-made compounds from pharmacies they worked in; if they were caught, they would be given a bad grade. I learned to work faster and more efficiently, which came in handy later. I learned to be organized, precise, and neat. These skills transfer to jewelry, pottery, and cooking which sustain me today.

During the summer of my third year, I also tried working in corporate America. Avon cosmetic company hired me for ten weeks to learn the skills needed to compound face powder, lipstick, and candles. I apprenticed at most of the lab benches to produce the new textures and colors of the season. The male technicians often teased me that I would not finish pharmacy school but marry instead. Why did I need such a fine education if I was going to stay at home and have children? They did not appreciate my fierce determination to complete learning and qualify for a New Jersey State Pharmacy license. My children certainly benefited from a mother who could help them in school and explain complex ideas to them.

During the fourth summer, I worked for the pharmaceutical company Schering Corporation. I loved the cosmetics industry with all its secrets but thought it was not

serious enough for a university scholar. Of course, I was wrong. At Schering, I was given my own lab, which was freezing, and told I had a specialty, dermatologic. For ten weeks, I tried to remain interested in stability studies and other menial tasks. Often, I would float into the library to look up information and gaze longingly at the other male interns. The isolation of lab work was not for me. I longed for the constant stimulation of people in the community pharmacy setting.

Before I entered my fifth year of college, I met my future husband. We were both going to the wedding of mutual friends. I had met him once before at Carol's holiday party; she was my best friend. She and I went to high school together. She attended Douglas College, the women's division of Rutgers, and her future husband went to Rutgers with my intended. Les and I were involved in other long-term relationships, which were somewhat disastrous. At their wedding, we connected in a meaningful way. It was love at second sight! We were married in June, within a year of Carol and Lew's wedding in September. I finished the last year of college, got married, and began a year-long internship to qualify for a pharmacy license.

## 2. INTERNSHIP YEAR

I am a married lady as of June 27, 1971. I finished five years of grueling education with a double major in biology and chemistry and a minor in pharmacy. My husband of one week is in medical school as I begin my internship at Ford's Drugs in downtown Orange, New Jersey. I am a bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, newly minted pharmacist committed to serving an internship of forty-eight hours a week in five days for the calendar year beginning July 1, 1971, to June 30, 1972. This means three eight-hour days and two twelve-hour days. I usually walked the mile to work because we had

only one car (a gold Chevy Impala), a wedding present from my husband's parents. I wouldn't say I liked the car's color but was not given any choice. It was a wonderful, new auto that lasted many years. When I go home for a dinner break, my workers ask where I am going out for dinner. I reply that I am going home to cook a meal for my husband, then return to work for three more hours. My salary is small, but internships are hard to come by; eating out is not an option.

I was the first female intern my boss had in his thirty-five years of practice. When I began my internship, the guy leaving said, "This is what is replacing me!!!" Nonetheless, I worked hard and learned quickly how to fill prescriptions and handle cranky patients. My mentor liked to golf and drink with his buddies. One night, he returned to the store when I was working the late shift. He put his arms around my waist and hugged me from behind. I elbowed him in the ribs and promptly quit. When I came home, upset and tearful, I called all the local pharmacies in the area for work but discovered that there were no intern positions available for upset pharmacists. In the morning, I quietly returned to work; my husband was in medical school, making no money. I learned to swear like a drunken sailor to find an offensive position. After that incident, we better understood my place in the pharmacy. I was not a pretty sex object but a healthcare provider in training. We remained friends long after my internship ended, and he remarried, but he did like to call me "fatass." At the end of that one year, I must leave this learning position and find a better-paying job, but I am pregnant! Oops! That was not in the game plan!

### 3. HOW I GOT FIRED

I completed the required full year of internship and passed the New Jersey State Board of Pharmacy comprehensive testing to qualify as a practicing pharmacist. I can take charge of filling prescriptions, compounding and dealing with the patients on my own. I received offers for full-time work from one local pharmacy but declined the offer. Instead, I found two part-time jobs in different towns, knowing they would be temporary. The job in Livingston, New Jersey, is for Saturdays, open to close, and two weeknights. The culture of this drugstore is nasty; people are demanding and rude. Patients take the phone out of my hands when I need to call the doctor for refills and demand to have their medications. They brook no resistance to their immediate needs. I learn to put up with a lot of abuse because we need the money for rent and food; my husband has another year of school before he can become a lowly medical intern in New York City. As time passed, I learned to deal with unkind, irrational people. They expect their demands to be met immediately like marauding children. I recognize their disease as something called “entitlementitis” or I want what I want, now!

Late in September, the store's owner called me into his office to tell me this was my last Saturday. He hired a replacement for me because he wants to vacation in Florida and needs to train a new pharmacist. I was shocked and surprised because I was healthy, although visibly pregnant, but willing and able to work for another month before the baby was due.

He says, “Didn’t you see the ads in the paper for a new pharmacist?”

I reply, “No, why would I be looking in the Help Wanted section?”

He instructs me to deposit my store keys with the woman who sells cosmetics when I leave. I fill prescriptions for the rest of the twelve-hour day and leave gracefully. At home, I am a tearful mess. How will we buy food, afford rent and live for the next year until Les's graduation? When I phone my aunt with my miserable news, she informs me I can collect unemployment benefits because I have been fired! What does this mean? Yes, I worked enough hours for enough time to qualify for benefits.

This boss contests my unemployment money because he states, "I looked uncomfortable!"

My case reviewer is astonished that he would object to these payments based on how he thought I looked. I was granted the funds we lived on for a year! This was the first time I was fired....more to follow.

#### 4. SHOP-RITE STEALING

Time passes, and three children are brought into the world. I had been a stay-at-home mom for seven years before I could return to work. I want to return to the work force but am a little nervous about the new computer technology that has come into general use. My friend in Bible school offers to talk to her husband, who is a pharmacy specialist for Shop-Rite supermarkets. He finds me a position with a local store two mornings a week. The two older children are in school full-time, and the little one has an adult babysitter to take care of him. I am overjoyed to be able to return to the profession I have trained for so long. I return to work just as computer systems are becoming the norm. With the help of a top-rate technician, I have come to terms with this new equipment and relearned the new drugs that have come on the market since I have been talking to babies and visiting the supermarket for fun outings. To maintain my license, I

need to acquire thirty education credits every two years. It takes a little while to get up to speed in a busy store, but it is attainable, and I am stubborn.

Just as I am learning how to balance working with housekeeping, about six months have gone by, the store is sold. Shop-Rite supermarkets are owned in groups of two or three. This unit had been stealing from the central corporation by the management. The front-end managers would order small appliances, like toasters or coffee pots, and sell them for a profit on the black market. The corporation became aware of this illegal practice and forced them to sell this store to another family of Shop-Rites. The new director called me to change my hours from two mornings a week to alternating evenings twice a week and Saturdays. I could not work these shifting hours. My family came first! So, regrettable. I am dismissed yet again!

#### 5. MORRIS PLAINS; DISHONESTY

In January of the next year, I went to work for a mom-and-pop store Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings. Great! I leave a one-pot dinner on the stove to warm when I go to work from five until nine at night. My husband comes home to feed the children and make sure they do their homework. As the years go by, I can work more days. This arrangement continues for thirty years at the same pharmacy. My boss, who is my friend at this point, wants to sell the business. He wants to travel the world and be free of the constant worries of maintaining a busy store. The mail-order filling of prescriptions by insurance companies is causing the profit margins to decrease. He tries to protect the employees by selling to a private owner rather than a chain operation. The new owner is a slippery character! He likes to sit in his office and buy cheap medications that are only available in volume that we don't need. They go to waste, but they are less



expensive. He does not pitch in to help my technician and me when we are busy, allowing us to take the full brunt of the workload. He begins to lose money and cheats! Rami looks for expensive medications to bill the health insurance and accepts the payments but does not provide the medications to the patient! This is called consumer fraud. My technician warned me to change my password so that he could not use my identity to do his villainy. Jon and I reverse as many of the phony charges as we can, but still, Rami persists. He antagonizes many customers with his lies and loses credibility with the patients.

One night, Julie comes into the store with a handful of receipts for medications and a computer printout of the drugs she ordered. She explains that she could not afford the hundred-dollar copay for her eye drops. She asked her doctor if she could use the unit doses for more than one day's application. The ophthalmologist said she certainly could. Julie asked me why her insurance showed that she got these drops monthly for this large copay when she did not have receipts for the medications. I tell her the truth! Rami has been billing her insurance, but she has not gotten these units. She is angry! She notifies the State Board of Pharmacy, her insurance company, and other authorities.

The next week, I go on vacation to the Grand Canyon with my husband and the Nikon photographers for a photo shoot. When I returned, Rami called to inform me that I didn't have to come to work Friday morning.

Duh! I say, "Do you want me to work on Monday?"

"No, I will call you when I need you!"

"Oh, you have just fired me? Thank you for letting me get on with my life. I don't steal for a living!" Now, I am not as stupid as I was at twenty-three. I file for

unemployment benefits. The agent reviews the case. He asks me over and over again if I have done anything wrong. I answer that I have not! He grants me benefits for a year. Eventually, the staff of the pharmacy testifies against Rami for fraud. He is fined and sells the store to another group of pharmacy owners. He tried to make a profit by consumer fraud rather than by hard work and fair prices.

This brings me to the need for pharmacy units to be unionized. The individual has no rights and is at the whim of unscrupulous owners. When I hear about the attempts to unionize Amazon, I understand their plight. An individual cannot fight back, but a group can make a difference.

## 6. EARLY MORNING IN THE PHARMACY

Snow is falling in white puffs turning into slippery crystals in the middle of February on my house and steep driveway, covering the once-green lawn with sparkling prisms of reflected light. It looks like the end of the world. I cannot see any cars tracking up the slick hill on my tree-lined street. It is Monday morning at seven-thirty; time to get ready for work in Morris Plains Pharmacy. My job as a managing pharmacist requires that I come to the family-owned store known as “Mom and Pop” to open for the day. This predates chain stores or multiple ownership operations. Reluctantly, I dress in warm clothes, snow boots, a ski hat, and an insulated jacket to venture out in a soggy New Jersey storm which usually clears up by noon. I usually bring an REI thermos of coffee to sip all morning, some cut-up cheese cubes, crackers, and a bunch of grapes to eat. The thermos keeps the coffee hot, so I don’t have to drink it microwaved and reheated.

First, my cute Maltese-Dachshund must go outside to pee. She loves to sniff all the new scents on the snow-blanketed lawn as I huddle in the inside corner of the garage, hoping she will soon discover the perfect spot to leave a yellow mark on the once pristine whiteness. Round and round Julie goes, following her tail until she squats in just the right location! “Good girl,” I say, rewarding her with a mini treat for her good behavior. She goes back into the house to wake up my husband so he can go to work in his office. He will come to work, but probably no one else will venture out on this stormy day! We are both dedicated to filling the needs of patients in need of care.

Can my Subaru, “The car made with love,” make it up the ninety-foot driveway to the top of the hill to the icy street? It skids a little to the halfway mark. I must get out of my car, open the garage, and find the forty-pound bag of sand, a plastic beach shovel, and a bucket to pour the sand onto the slippery surface. Slowly, I spread shovels full of this gritty stuff onto the once-matte blacktop to gain some traction. Of course, the sand creeps into my boots, making my feet feel itchy and uncomfortable. I close the garage door, get back into my Subaru Outback, restart the engine and make it to the crest of the driveway only to thump over the packed ice and snow that the early morning plows have pushed against the top. Now, on the plowed street, it is only about a half-mile to the highway, where the road is slippery but manageable. I am afraid to travel the shortcut because it means going down a steep, curving hill to get into town. There is not much traffic to contend with because the schools are closed due to the storm.

One time, taking the shortcut, I got stuck at the top of the hill because some cars had collided, leaving the road impassable. Until the mess was cleared, I calmly drank my

coffee, ate some cookies, and waited. Instead, on this wintry day, I travel the four-lane highway to Morris Plains with little or no one out and about.

Mornings in a small-town community pharmacy are usually quiet for the first few hours before patients realize they have no medicine left for the day, and probably no refills. I unlock the back door as the alarm sounds, making me rush to enter my security code to deactivate the raucous noise before the alarm company is alerted to an illegal entry. It feels warm and safe in this place where I have worked for twenty years, first as a part-time employee on Monday nights and Sunday mornings, then five days a week. When my children were small, I longed to return to the workforce to practice what I had learned in school and to have some adult conversations. For seven years, I dreamed of a life outside of gooey children, potty training, and Cheerios stuck to the kitchen floor. When my youngest son went to nursery school, and my older two sons were in primary school, my turn came to go back to work part-time nights and weekends. I prepared simple dinners, such as chili with beans, ready for my husband when he returned from the office so he could feed the children. I gladly went off to conquer the world of pharmacy. A little ice and snow would not deter me from my mission of being a healthcare provider!

It is still dark inside the store as I count the paper money and coins in the register and take readings of the previous day's transactions. Later in the day, my boss will compare the computer totals to the cash, checks, and credit transactions, looking for gross errors and small goofs. The pharmacy hired high school kids to wait on customers, check in merchandise, and stock the shelves. When you employ teens working their first jobs after school, they often make mistakes at the register. Schools do not teach counting change as part of their curriculum. Simple math is forgotten as hand-held cell phones and

computers do the work of calculating. Often, I taught the kids how to “count up,” starting from the pennies, nickels, and dimes to the quarters; lastly, the dollars were included. If a customer gave a teen a few cents to even out the amount of money to be returned, they were lost. They needed to learn how to “make change” rather than rely on the cash register. Many kids began their working experience behind the counter of this small-town pharmacy. They learned to be polite to grumpy sick people, come to work on time, and answer the phones.

A mother of one of the kids I had trained stopped me at an art show many years later to tell me that her daughter had become a nurse. She had gained valuable experience learning in the pharmacy to deal with patients and be a responsible human being. It was nice to hear that someone I mentored had become successful.

The kids were taught to say “Hello” when answering the phone, ask for the patient’s name and spelling of the name, and request the six-digit prescription number and date of the last filling of the drug. Most of the teens functioned quite well in this environment, of course, some better than others. Some required little or no prompting on how to gather this information successfully, and others were too shy or inhibited to ask for these vital facts. I trained all three of my sons to work with me on Sundays when they were fifteen. They wanted to earn money for extra things they desired, like games and toys. I instructed the kids to listen calmly to patients’ requests and to be kind to people who were sick and often behaving badly. I informed them, “Here I am, not Mommy, but your boss. When I ask you to do a job, you must listen or find someplace else to work!” Even if people are rude, they must do their best to meet their needs. They could tell me about their woes after the patient left the pharmacy.

The day begins with front and back doors being unlocked, the computer screens being turned on, phone messages being listened to, and partial medications refilled. If there were not enough tablets or capsules to complete the order, the part was filled with the rest of the drugs coming into the pharmacy by the wholesaler twice a day. Patients were happy to have this expensive delivery service that relieved their anxiety. The commuter train to New York City was across the street from the store. We opened at eight-thirty in the morning so people could pick up their medications before catching the train to the city. On a good day, the physician's office called in more refills or new prescriptions, allowing us to have the needed drugs ready to be picked up. Often, the patient was out of refills but needed the drugs for their daily use. Doctors must give limited quantities of drugs with refills for continued use or no refills at all. The New Jersey State Board of Pharmacy has rules for this need for refills. We were allowed to fill a three-day stopgap supply, call the doctor, and ask for more medicine verbally. This rule was a pain in the neck! It caused too much record-keeping and confusion. I filled the RX with the complete amount with no additional refills, then called the doctor for a new prescription. This allowed for less paperwork and record-keeping and more patient satisfaction.

Later in the afternoon, the high school kids would come to help. We employed two to three teens, mostly girls, who attended school all day, came to work for four hours then went home to do their homework. They were paid minimum wage but happy to add to their family's limited income. Over the years, we hired many sisters and brothers of the neighborhood kids to work. Some kids were shy and clueless, some full of bravado as teenagers often are, and some were quite nice to have at the pharmacy.

In the fall of 1990, we had the good fortune to hire a lovely high school girl as the new school year began. Lisa could handle herself well with the customers, check in orders, and relay phone conversations with ease. She had lustrous black hair reaching to her waist, a chubby build, and an angelic smile that was totally disarming. I could rely on her skill to count the tablets and capsules on the Kirby-Lester mini-computer. This device is a recent addition to the pharmacy. Tablets or capsules are slowly poured into the hopper as a scanner records the amounts and saves the information for later use. We often had to go back to these files to check the drug count for patient use or record-keeping of narcotic files for the state.

Lisa could understand garbled messages from patients with ease. I would say, “Hey Lisa, get the phone. Mrs. Smith needs what? Do you have the prescription number and date of the last fill? She doesn’t know? Okay, put her on hold, and I will find the data!” Many elderly people could not see the serial numbers on the little brown bottles holding their medication or were too confused to decipher this information. If the telephone stopped long enough to tag the incoming orders from the Newman wholesaler, Lisa would take the bottles out of the sealed bins and line them up on the top of the pharmacy divider. Then, I would sweep by, take the stock off the counter, and place them alphabetically on the shelves in their proper places, with the oldest ones up front and the newer bottles in the back. All medication labels have expiration dates and must be taken off the shelves if they are outdated. Most drug stores have a raised section where the pharmacy staff works, with a step-down to the front cash register. This is a traditional arrangement, probably so the pharmacist can see the customers in the store or

prevent theft! Stealing is a big problem for stores big and small. Most places have security cameras, not to protect the customers but to prevent the theft of merchandise.

This high school girl carried a full academic load of chemistry, math, history, and English that would ensure her entry into a good university. She did well in her studies and was nice to have worked in the pharmacy. She and her brother were often left to make their own meals because their parents worked long hours in a Korean Deli in a nearby town. Lisa had intelligence and street smarts which would help her achieve success. I don't think she had time for seasonal sports at school, which often caused conflicts with the kids' work schedules. She always came to work on time, ready to do her job.

We had worked together for about six months when my boss called me into the back office to discuss an issue with the register totals. This cubby-hole of space was located in the corner of the dispensing area with mirrored glass, allowing a one-way view into the store. We could see the customers, but they could not see us. When we had time to sit, we could consume sandwiches and coffee, often cold, in this private area. There was no time for lunch hour; we ate whenever we had the chance. Dave, the owner, told me that money was missing from the register, not a lot, perhaps about twenty dollars. Did I know anything about this? Duh, of course not! I was always careful to write notes or leave receipts for medications bought from nearby pharmacies. We had the arrangement to borrow drugs from other stores when people could not wait for orders to arrive or for expensive medications. Many tablets cost hundreds of dollars, but the physician only prescribes a part of the bottle, leaving the pharmacy with the rest! These leftover meds cannot be returned, so selling them wholesale to another store is useful



economically. It is difficult to lose so much income in an industry whose profit margins are so small.

Most pharmacies are kept afloat by the over-the-counter drugs and sundries sold in the front of the store. Today, local drug stores are being replaced by chain stores. The prescription department is located at the back. Customers must walk through a maze of cosmetics, toys, food items, and seasonal decorations to pick up their drugs. Mail-order has taken its toll on the local pharmacy. Patients can receive a three-month order supply for the same copay as a one-month supply allowed in the local shop. Morris Plains Pharmacy sold all the latest gifts and Hallmark cards to compensate for the loss of income from expensive drugs. Over half the store was stocked with enticing goods for holidays, birthdays, and other events.

Small amounts of money continued to be missing over the months as Dave monitored the register receipts more carefully. Maybe, a mistake was made, giving change? We began to check the schedule to see who was on the board the day before when the money did not add up. There were three teens, a technician, and a pharmacist...not enough information! As the thief became bolder and more assured that small amounts of money were not being noticed as missing, the miscreant increased the take. Closer attention was now being paid to match the loss of funds to the people working. Unfortunately, thieves are not as smart as they think they are, or they think everyone else is stupid. Of course, we narrowed the monetary losses to the times of day Lisa worked! The end of the school year was nearing, and Lisa left her job at the pharmacy. My boss did not confront her about her theft as he had always done in the past with other kids. He had more important issues to deal with; he was in the process of

selling the business to another owner. In those days, former employees often asked for recommendations when they applied for a new job. She would not have been given a clean slate. Sometimes, I wonder if this behavior emboldened her. Did she continue to steal when she needed extra money for shoes or clothes, or was it the joy of getting away with the deed? I never saw or heard about her again, so I don't know if she went to college, got a degree in business, or became a success.

Many years later, I asked my boss and his wife to recall the events of this trauma. They did not remember Lisa or monitor the stealing. Dave said, "There were so many kids and adults who worked for him who stole either goods or money from the store!" He thought he would have remembered someone taking cash from the register; he would have confronted her, for sure! He tolerated party goods and sundries being taken but not money! I tried to remind him that he was in the process of selling a business he had owned and run for thirty years. Emotionally he was drained by the sale of something he had worked so hard to build. He and his wife wanted to travel the world before age and bad health put a damper on their vision of being free from the constant responsibilities of the store that was now holding its own in the marketplace but not producing great profits. I was amazed by his statement that most or maybe many employees stole from their employers. Now, I wonder if my memory is faulty and if I made all this stuff up. Perhaps not. Maybe he did not remember Lisa because he did not work with part-time help. In those days, I often worked nights and weekends when my kids were young. This was when the high school kids helped out. He reminded me of the store bookkeeper who embezzled thousands of dollars and a cosmetician who gave stuff away. Then there

was the fifteen-year-old who stole five hundred Percocet narcotics from the drug shelf... Oh, but those are stories for another day.

I loved my work in the pharmacy, with its challenges and setbacks. I liked the ability to find goods and services needed by my patients. It was gratifying to be able to explain to people how their medication worked in their bodies, the side effects, and the way to take the drugs effectively. Also, I liked teaching the teens to be orderly and friendly. Today, I use my skills to dust, price, and sort merchandise in Habitat for Humanity in a thirty-five thousand-foot warehouse close to my house. As I walk the floors, I place merchandise carefully on the shelves so people can buy used goods with dignity and respect. Once a pharmacist, always a pharmacist! I volunteer, come and go as I please, and receive the admiration and respect of the warehouse staff as I try to find order in chaos. Much to my amazement, people do continue to steal and change price stickers from this non-profit organization. This behavior upsets everyone. Human behavior is amazing.

## 7. CHRISTMAS EVE IN THE PHARMACY

In the fall, the pharmacy has the overpowering fragrance of cinnamon, clove, and nutmeg. Pinecones, scented with these lovely aromas, come in cellophane packages tied with red ribbons to be spread around the house for the holiday season. Dried eucalyptus leaves tied in bunches alongside the fake Christmas trees add to the overpowering smell of the holiday, invading the store and making me sneeze. Christmas ornaments made of fragile glass, red and green stockings trimmed in fake white fur, and boxes of greeting cards with Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, and Season's Greetings line the shelves,

enticing customers to purchase them as they walk to the back of the store where their prescriptions are filled.

Endless gift boxes of chocolates gaily wrapped for the holiday appear by the cartful to be unpacked and prominently displayed for the season of giving. My favorite treat is ribbon candy, colored in jewel-like shades of red and green, and yellow; it splinters into tiny fragments if dropped! The store is filled with inexpensive costume jewelry, useless knick-knacks, colored glass vases, and tiny smiling porcelain statues of angels ready for the wrapping counter. Crèches appear with the three wise men, donkeys, sheep, Mother Mary, and baby Jesus in various materials such as china, straw, and plastic with mangers to house the icons.

Gift wrapping is offered on any purchase, complete with fluffy bows and tissue paper stuffed into shopping bags with the Morris Plains Pharmacy logo. Sometimes two or three salespeople tie curly ribbons to help package the presents. It is fun to help customers buy gifts and wrap them up; I like to make the totes as pretty as possible when I can leave the prescription counter.

Stocking stuffers are also a must for completing the holiday spirit. Little things such as candy bars, tiny toy cars, and decorated paper with matching pens are some prime choices. Every Christmas stocking must be hung with care for Santa and filled with an array of stuff.

The month of December, beginning right after Thanksgiving, is a busy time in the community pharmacy. This is the end of the year for insurance plans for people working for corporations; they pay part of the cost of medications for their employees. There is a rush to get the most out of their plans before the final quarter. The orders for extra

prescription medications that are paid by the employee's insurance plan add to the increased sales volume and confusion.

I love to work Christmas evening because everyone is so obsessed with gift buying for people they almost forgot on their list. The object is to have one present for any and all people possible who may show up at dinner; no one must be left out!

The saying is, "You can practically sell the wallpaper off the wall at Christmas."

Finally, it is quiet in the store except for the endless rounds of "Jingle Bells" and "O Holy Night" on the store radio. Just a technician and I remain to fill prescriptions. Occasionally, someone walks in to buy some perfume or a small present, but usually, it is just a waiting game for closing time at nine o'clock. Unexpectedly, I see a young man with a hip-rolling walk and a baseball cap backward on his head come in through the front door. He is in his early twenties with a slim build and a chip on his broad shoulders. My defensive antennae begin to quiver as I sense a certain danger in this person's affect. He saunters to the pharmacy counter as he sizes up the store and me. I ask if I could help him. He demands Terpin hydrate with Codeine cough syrup with an air of malice brought about by long practice into getting what he wants by being abusive. Cough syrup with codeine is considered a Class V drug and can be purchased over the counter with proper identification at the pharmacist's discretion. This combination of ninety percent alcohol, lemon flavoring, and codeine had just been taken off the market in New Jersey. It was called G.I. Gin during World War II because it was available to soldiers. It gives an immediate sense of euphoria when gulped down from its four-ounce bottle. Once, I tasted it in a small unit dose cup in the hospital pharmacy and got an immediate jolt.

“Sorry”, I explain to this abuser; “this product is no longer available. It has just become unavailable because of its potential for abuse.”

He looks at me in disbelief and says, “Fuck you”, as he begins to saunter back out of the store. I look at him in his unfocused eyes and wish him a Merry Christmas! Really! It is time to go home, sit with my husband and enjoy a glass of champagne. I knew from the moment he walked into the store that whatever he wanted, we did not have. I had seen this scenario before and was prepared.

Sometimes people present challenges that I did not sign up for, but they certainly provide interesting stories. I often wonder how I became so tough in the face of adversity. Perhaps I was young and fearless, confident in my ability to withstand pressure. I am not so sure if I would react in the same way today, at seventy-five.

## CHAPTER FOUR: ONCE I WAS A CHILD

### 1. EARLIEST MEMORIES

I love to go to the pottery studio in Madison for many reasons. Sometimes I am gripped by great anxiety listening to the news of world events. As the potter's wheel turns counterclockwise, a sense of peace and tranquility returns. I derive great pleasure from taking a brown lump of messy, sticky clay, slapping it into a round ball, plopping it onto the potter's wheel, and slowly applying just the right amount of downward force to center the mass. As the clay conforms into a workable form, I begin to breathe a sigh of relief that I have some small bit of control over my immediate environment. Once the goo is centered on the fiber bat, I can guide it into a useful bowl or plate. I lose all sense of time and space as I go into "the zone," creating order from chaos. This skill was hinted at when I was about two and a half years old when I played in the dirt.

My earliest memory as a child began when I made mud pies with a spoon and a bowl in the hard-packed earth of my grandfather's yard in the poor, immigrant section of Paterson, New Jersey. This creation looked so delicious that I needed to taste it. So, I spooned a lovely lump of dirt into my waiting mouth. I then began to scream and cry, which brought my mother to run outside, sponge in hand, to wash my mouth out. She had been keeping an eye on me, casually looking through the kitchen window framed with dark green gingham curtains ruffled on a rod as she washed dishes in the sink. I have always loved the feel of brown, squishy mud as it conforms to interesting shapes. I took art as an elective all four years of high school; I worked to gain the skills and

technique to produce bowls and mugs on the potter's wheel. The feeling of creating order from chaos gave me a sense of control in a world where I had few choices.

My mother, my father, and I lived downstairs in his parent's house when I was unexpectedly born to a mother who was supposed to work as a nurse to support my father. He was attending college on the G.I bill. My father enlisted in the Army, as did every able-bodied male of that era, to stop Hitler's decimation of the Jews. He served five years in the military during World War II and completed his education to become a guidance counselor. Having little or no money, my parents were reduced to living in my paternal grandfather's house. The two-story house was a cold-water flat heated by a coal stove in the poor, ethnic (mostly Jewish immigrants, now mostly poor minorities) section of Paterson. At the end of the driveway in a small garage, Zadie, my paternal grandfather, had a furniture repair shop for fine imported furniture from hand-carvers in Italy. He learned his craft as a young man in Poland when he was sent out to learn a trade as a teenager. He did not know how to read or write English. He could read Hebrew prayers and speak Yiddish and Polish but very little else. My maternal grandfather, Rubin a butcher, was horrified by this living arrangement but could not offer any financial aid as his business had failed due to poor management by a partner who gambled away his deposit money away, twice! Rubin also emigrated from Eastern Europe but received an education in Lithuania, where the men and the women were taught to read and write Hebrew, Polish, and Russian. Education was seen as a class distinction among Jews. Poor and illiterate were not high-status values.

Zadie loved me with a fierce, unconditional ardor that threatened my mother's sanity. When he heard me cry while working in his shop, as babies often do, he whisked



me away to safety. He kept me safe in his workshop until my father could come to my rescue. Zaidie would implore my father to get rid of Francis, this terrible woman, my mother, so that I could be properly cared for. This story is told to me by my mother, who did not like Zaidie's actions. I never understood my grandfather's fierce protection of me, partly because he spoke only Yiddish and partly because I was afraid of his ferocity. Perhaps I developed strong ego strength in knowing that I was loved unconditionally by a doting and caring grandfather. He gave me the ability to create and design, built from knowing that one is loved no matter what mistakes are made. The ability to fail, maybe metaphorically to eat mud, but be allowed to rise up and continue is a valuable lesson that I carried with me later in life.

Perhaps, my mother was not prepared to take on the responsibilities of a lonely caretaker of a demanding child. At twenty-three, isolated from her friends and left alone with me, she longed for a more glamorous life as an Army cadet nurse that she had qualified for. She had two years of training as an army nurse, then turned down a scholarship in North Carolina to further her education to marry my father. I think she regretted her choice when the reality of her circumstances became apparent. Mom worked some private duty night hours to pay for food and clothes but spent most of her daytime hours with me, apparently a difficult first child who didn't want to sleep on schedule or eat very well.

When my father was awarded a Director of Guidance degree from Montclair State College, we moved to Maryland on the Del-Mar- VA peninsula to a small, rented house next to a field of flat, spikey cactus plants. Dad taught in Caldwell but was not rehired to teach because of religious segregation by the mostly white Protestant school board. Jews were not wanted in their community. Cacti became my next painful memory of my early

childhood. I walked through these lovely, green plants with tiny, hair-like protrusions embedded in my feet! Francis, my mom, pulled them out one by one with a tiny tweezer as I bellowed my pain and anger. To this day, I can't bear the sight of cacti, succulents, or other spikey plants. They are not cute but nasty attackers to my bare feet!

Photos taken at this time show me with straight blond hair and green eyes. I did not resemble my mother, who had dark curly hair and brown eyes. I looked more like my father, who became my ally in the fight to gain independence from my mother's tyranny of perfection. She needed me to bring her gratification for her devotion to being my mother. I became one of her only companions until I was five years old and my sister was born. Mom enrolled me in ballet class at three years old to have an activity to occupy her. As the story was told, the class danced to the right; I went to the left. I led another little girl, as well, as I danced to my own choreography. The girl's mother was incensed that I would lead her daughter astray and told my mother so! I still tend to follow my inner voice to know how to proceed with a new idea. I don't remember this event except in its repetition to illustrate my stubbornness. I do remember the feeling of the stretchy ballet-pink tights, soft-toe shoes, and frilly, pink tutu. Ballet pink is a lovely soft, slightly peach color that graces my wardrobe of soft cotton tee shirts today.

Chickenpox was my next memory of childhood. Across the street from our small, two-bedroom rented house lived a girl about six years older than me. I was about three years old when Kathy became my cherished friend. I adored Kathy because she gave me someone to play with my own age. We built sandcastles in her backyard, ate white bread snacks with purple grape jelly, and had a good time together. Kathy's father was a delivery man for Bond bread, a wonderfully airy, sliced bread that came in a plastic sleeve. We

rolled this gourmet confection into gummy balls, then ate them like candy. Much later, this bread proved to be a non-nutritive substitution for “real” bread. It was high in sugar and salt and low in protein. The advertising proclaimed it built bodies eight ways! (What eight ways?) Boy, did it taste and feel good to eat! Whole grain or multi-grain bread does not hold a candle to this early culinary convenience.

Early spring brought with it the usual childhood scourge of Chicken Pox. Before children were vaccinated against this disease, springtime was the usual time for this annoying childhood disease. We usually traveled back to New Jersey to stay with my maternal grandmother, Chana, for the Passover holiday in March or April when my father had a school break. Kathy, who was probably in second grade at school, contracted the pox. I was forbidden to cross the country road to play with her. She stood on one side of the road, and I watched her from the other side. “Sharon,” she said, “come and play with me. We can build sandcastles and eat bread balls!” I wanted to play with her so much! Yes, I lost out on my need to please her and crossed the road to her house. Of course, I got sick; fever, skin eruptions, and misery. We could not go home to my grandparents for the spring holiday because I was sick! In addition, I was punished for disobeying my mother’s refusal to let me play with my best friend. I don’t think I understood the germ theory of disease, but I knew I had caused anguish to my lonely mother. She needed a break from her exile in Maryland to be with her family for the holidays. During my school years, nothing could keep me from attending class, not the sore throat or muscle aches. Staying home was not a pleasant experience.

When we did travel to Passaic in the summer, I was wrapped in a scratchy, khaki army blanket leftover from my father’s time in the United States Army service. There was

no back seat in the black, two-seater Chevy made just after the war. It had no heater or radio but a lovely floor space where I could lie down and nap for the long trip home to my grandparents' house. I can still remember the feel of the heavy covering and the wet smell of the wool, slightly moldy yet grass like. My favorite choice of color continues to be mousy browns and army greens. My husband calls them "dead-mouse" colors! They comfort me with warm memories of my time on the floor of that Chevy.

Late fall brought with it the crunch of gold, crimson, and brown leaves on the ground in wonderful pointed and rounded shapes. Whenever I walk on Drew's campus in the autumn, I remember with fondness that time of contentment and acceptance. I like the feel of leaves underfoot as I remember times past. Going back to school has always been a time of great promise to explore new ideas, perhaps to fall short, but always to reach out to learn and expand my horizons. My father walked with me down the road to buy brilliant yellow and red chrysanthemums for my birthday party. November that year was warm with a brilliant fall sun warming our backs. I felt important and loved. He held my hand as I skipped along beside him. The earth was a good place to be when I was at my father's side. He supported my need for independence but never took my side in my battles with my mother. As an adult, when I confronted him, he explained that he had to live with her, and I did not. He told me "to drop it" or let it go and move on! My childhood memories are a patchwork of actual events and those told to me. I can still hear his voice today when I get myself all raveled up. "Drop it" echoes through my head when I know I can't go any further.

My father set me on the path to scholarship when I noticed BOYS in the sixth grade. Anyway, in sixth grade or twelve years old, I began to notice BOYS! I wanted to be cute

and noticed by the male population in my class. I thought that the females who were reticent and non-competitive got more of the kind of attention that I wanted. History had the overtones of male priority attached to it. When I showed my father my nasty test grade on the Civil War, he decided to help me study until I became secure in the texts and my ability to compete with anyone, male or female, in my class. I became aware of the fact that smartness and knowledge were certainly in the purview of the female population. As I gained confidence in my ability to compete in a male-centric world, my grades continued to improve. I no longer cared who saw me as cute or smart, or lovely. Being popular was seen as a negative in my home. I wanted to gain the approval of my mentor, who supported me, not my peers.

When I attended college at seventeen, I used this defining experience to compete with the boys at pharmacy school. I was no longer afraid to be a part of a class of ten women in a cohort of one hundred and ten males. We were told on the first day of college that half of our freshman class would not complete the coursework to graduate. Physics and organic chemistry weeded out those unwilling to commit to the grueling task of constant study. Many of the boys in this university had attended Bronx science and other highly competitive high schools. My high school was mediocre at best, but I competed and graduated! Thanks, Dad!

When I was almost six years old, we returned to New Jersey. We stayed with my maternal grandmother, grandfather, and Aunt Thelma on the top floor of their house in Passaic. My father got a job as Director of Guidance at Hasbrouck Heights High School. I slept in a pull-out bed in the sunroom. It was forest green with a nubby texture. I love this dark green for its possibilities of comfort and repose. There was no kindergarten for

me; I went directly into first grade because I could read and write. We could not afford private kindergarten in Maryland, so my mother taught me to sight-read using “See spot run” books my father brought home from school. My sister was born at about this time, although I don’t remember much about her babyhood. I was so involved in going to school to become a superstar!

My first day of school was a disaster! I pooped in my pants, probably due to nerves, but marched with the class around the room when we were commanded to do so. My mother and Aunt Thelma were to pick me up at a certain school door, but being new to the layout, I became confused and walked out the wrong entrance. Number eleven school was a three-story, square building with tall windows on each side. It appeared to me all the same on every side! No one came to take me home! I waited for a long time before deciding to walk home by myself. Of course, I did not know how to get back. I ran crying down the gray, slanted, slate sidewalk, tripping and crying, first away from the school before I realized that I was lost! I retraced my steps back to my starting point. Eventually, my aunt Thelma and my mother picked me up in her olive-green Desoto sedan with three oval chrome vents on the side of the body. They spotted me sobbing near the school. Of course, I was punished for disobeying orders to wait for them at the correct door. They were relieved to find me unhurt but upset. It seems they were late in retrieving me from school. Being comforted was not on their agenda for child development. This lesson echoes through the years, making me self-reliant and tough. Early on, I learned it is okay to make mistakes, cry, be sad, and then fix the mess as best you can.

During this stay at my grandparent’s house in Passaic, while we waited for our new house to be built in Paramus, I was often left alone with Grandma Chana, better-known as

Bubba-Chanka! She cooked and baked all through my childhood years. She would give me small pieces of bread dough to play with. I rolled them on the table or floor to make interesting shapes such as spirals, cubes, and little balls. I wanted her to bake these delicacies for me, but she would say, “Peh, nisht gut!” (Bad, not good). She spoke a mixture of English, Russian, and Yiddish, which I understood from a survivalist’s necessity. I needed to learn Yiddish to understand my parent’s and grandparents’ secret language when they did not want me to know what they talked about.

## 2. IN MY BUBBBIE’S KITCHEN: A POEM TO MY GRANDMA

Hot gas stove with “blech” on top to warm food.

Smelling of chicken soup with feet boiling in a pot; onions, garlic, celery

Want to taste all the goodness.

And the cookies - no, not ordinary bits of flour, sugar, and cinnamon - wonderfully dense

Hard to bite-needs to be dipped in a glass of tea!

Small bits of dough to play with.

“Gae avec,” leave me to cook my dinner before Shabbat!

I return again and again to feel and smell and cook the memories of a small child left alone with my Bubbie.

Can I return again and again to feel safe and loved, and adored?

Cooking and baking give me the satisfaction of creating something good to eat, smell, and taste. Chopping, slicing, breading chicken, and making meatballs feed the creative process while I feed my belly. I love to cook and bake and create beautiful food,

lovely to look at and good to eat, feeding the stomach and soul. When my husband was sick for four months with COVID, confined to a chair in the sunroom, I cooked every day to feed him to health and keep me centered.

### 3. ODE TO MY UNCLE

When we shared my grandparents' house, Chana and Ruben, I slept in my Uncle Leon's pull-out sofa bed in the sunroom. My mother's younger brother by ten years, Leon, was someone I adored. He was away at school, Ithaca College, in Syracuse, New York. He was a college boy who wore grey wool sweaters with elbow patches and smoked a pipe. I love the color gray. My uncle Leon left a baggy, smoke-gray pullover sweater with suede elbow patches in a bureau drawer when he left for college. A curious child, I searched through his drawers in his bedroom until I found this treasure left behind. It was ragged and worn, but I inhaled its fragrance and put the woolly sweater over my head. He was tall, about six feet, and I was small, about five feet. Eventually, I grew to be five foot ten inches tall, following my family's genetics for height. My uncle and grandfather stood six feet in height in their prime. My family was tall compared to most of the Eastern European refugees who had little to eat. They managed to get enough nutrition to thrive during economic deprivation. I loved to wear that baggy sweater everywhere. Eventually, my mother made it disappear. It comforted me in times of emotional stress as I crawled into its loving arms. Mom was jealous of my adoration for anyone but her.

Today, gray is a fashionable color; I love the variations of gray! Some grays are greenish, some brown, some dark and sultry. Gray brings a whole universe of possibilities for decorating and fashion. It loves to pair with warm colors like reds and pinks or cool shades like blues or greens. Truly gray is accepting of everyone! My uncle was like that



sweater, he loved to “work the room” and talk to people, making them feel special and important.

He was a true salesman. Leon owned a real estate agency in Clifton; everyone in town knew him. He loved to buy new Cadillac cars and have expensive dinners in fancy restaurants. He spent time with his children and really enjoyed his grandchildren. He liked to pull pranks and loved to laugh. Many years later, I recount his burial service at age eighty-five.

My son, Michael, and I attended his funeral in Clifton, held outside at the B’nai Abraham cemetery in a field filled with green-leafed trees, gray headstones, and a massive attendance of one hundred and fifty family, friends, and neighbors. Due to COVID19, social distancing and face masks were required. The chairs were not quite six feet apart, so we stood at the back of the assembled group. We listened to his adult granddaughters talk about the good times they had at his side. Then two of his sons spoke lovingly of their father as they reminisced about his sense of humor and involvement with his family. He loved to spend time with his kids and friends. The wind blew softly, and the sun shined brightly for this community tribute to a life well-lived. I don’t think anyone recognized me or knew that I was there; I was simply glad to bear witness to this end-of-life ritual. He had meaning in the shaping of my life.

Memories came back to me as I stood at his funeral. Leon gave me my first pair of roller skates at age ten. They were metal contraptions with an adjustable top piece. These skates came with a key that was needed to adjust the toe part so that you could get your shoe into the apparatus. The hard part always was finding where you left the key! I loved those skates which took me all around the neighborhood. My knees were often scabbed by

falling on the uneven sidewalk. What a sense of freedom to cruise around on four metal wheels! On one occasion, I skated to the borders of our neighborhood. I was amazed to find blinking lights added to the sandy landscape. The new Garden State Parkway marked the end of our development with toll booths and whizzing cars! It was as though an alien spaceship had landed. Progress at its finest had entered our neighborhood.

We celebrated birthdays, anniversaries, and weddings together until the family grew too large. My husband and I were left off the guest list as more attention was paid to his children's spouses, grandchildren, and in-laws.

The last time I talked with Leon and his wife was when they visited my mother at her assisted living residence. My mother, Leon, Joan (his wife), my husband, and I went to a local restaurant for lunch in Hackensack. We had a lovely time talking and catching up as we ate. We remembered his mother, Chana, and his father Rubin. We spoke of his father's butcher shop, his grown-up kids, and his new condo in Totowa. Of course, Mom kept steering the conversation to herself as she always needed to be center stage. Little did I know that he declined due to a long-standing heart condition? It was the last time I saw him. I look back on that time with fondness, grateful for having the opportunity to reconnect with one of my favorite people.

#### 4. FATASS

Back to my childhood in Paramus. When I was ten years old, I would walk to my friend's house three blocks away to play. Her name was Karen; she had straight brown hair, big brown eyes, and wore glasses. Her grandmother lived with the family; she was a demanding seamstress from someplace in Poland or Russia. Karen was an okay student, not very pretty, and was constantly criticized by Grandma. She lived in a

house between a girl who was about the same age as me on the left and a girl two years older on the right of her house. Across the street were two brothers of about the same age and another two boys who lived down the street. They all seemed to have come from the city, perhaps Brooklyn or the Bronx; they had the aggressive manners of city kids or maybe immigrants. I was usually astonished by their forward ways but longed to play with these kids anyway. They played stickball in the street with the sewers as base plates. I was a shy child who longed for friends but learned early not to trust many people. One day, on a sunny fall afternoon, I had permission to go home with Karen and to get off the big, yellow bus at her stop. The street was on a curving hill with split-level houses on both sides; the houses were adjacent to a busy thoroughfare at the top of the hill. I came off the school bus at Karen's drop-off point to watch a bunch of ball-playing kids; someone called out, "There goes Crisco." I did not know what this meant at first; it means fat in the can! I can still feel the sting of disapproval and disappointment by this unkind name-calling; I was the other, certainly not just one of the neighborhood kids. Yes, I was a skinny kid with a fat tush and long legs. I had yet to grow into my body, like an ugly swan. Oh, these kids were overweight, to a one, due to their constant snacking on potato chips, pretzels, and soda. They liked to dare me to eat just one potato chip; I would gladly comply! I had the discipline of a stubborn child defying the crowd. My mother had banned all these delicious goodies from our house, long ago. She taught prenatal care; her nutritionist told her of the uselessness of "empty" calories. We were only allowed rye bread, orange juice, and fruit for snacks. This comment about my posterior stayed with me for a very long time!

Issues with my posterior continued when I was an intern in the pharmacy. My boss liked to call me “fatass”. Do insults to my caboose never go away?

Now, growing up in the age of Twiggy, the super-skinny model of the sixties, I longed to wear size twelve pants; I could barely reach that Olympic goal. Diet and exercise could not change my big-boned Russian frame nor remove my fat posterior. Many years later, I sat for a free CAT scan of my whole body, only to find that my behind was muscle not fat; it could not be modified by diet and exercise. Most women I know have a body part they do not like; men don’t seem to have these issues with body perception. Then, the Kardashians of television fame came into media consciousness! Wow, my butt was in! I could revel in the fact that I am a healthy female who is productive, not overweight, and okay. I have come to terms with myself as a septuagenarian. Perhaps it is time to accept who I am and feel comfortable with my body.

So, what have I learned from living with painful slurs and taunts? Words matter! Kindness is an asset best learned early in life. Also, learning to listen and perceive the mind of others is valuable to be able to be a positive force in the world. Learn to listen to the words and the thoughts behind the words of others. Trust yourself to know that what you are thinking is real. Learn something new every day, stretch your talents-go forward!

## 5. WALKING TO THE LIBRARY

As a child, I could walk down a two-lane road with no sidewalks to a small family-run grocery store. Cars kicked up pebbles as they whizzed by, causing me to be wary of their coming down the road. This store sold packaged goods, had fruit and vegetables, and a luncheon counter with round, twirling stools to enjoy a soda or ice

cream. The best part of the shop was the candy counter which allowed me to indulge my childish sweet tooth. I sneaked quarters from my mother's purse to buy chocolate bars and taffy to hide in my pockets to fuel my reading at the branch library. I was amazed that my controlling mother never confronted me on the loss of many coins over the years; perhaps she knew but tacitly condoned my theft. If I received an allowance, I don't remember being given any money, or it was insufficient.

About the age of twelve, I decided to read every book in the library that summer, beginning with the letter "a", giving priority to anything with sexy titles. The branch library had low, continual shelves that wrapped around the walls, just the right height for a child to look at the many offerings. The only book I clearly remember reading that year was Hawaii by James Michener. My sixth-grade teacher, who was a geology major, recommended reading the chapters about the formation of the Hawaiian Islands by volcanic eruptions. The librarian called my mother to ask if I was allowed to read this stuff because it contained some sexy material that she deemed inappropriate for a child. My mother responded, "She can read anything she wants. She will only understand the book at her level!" Of course, now I was keyed into the fact that there was something juicy to look for! Later on, my ninth-grade teacher blacked out whole sections of Shakespeare's Taming of the Shrew in our workbooks to avoid any reference to sex. This unintentional underlining of the text caused me to read the original play to see what had been deleted. Something about his tongue in her tail...don't know! Perhaps the sexual revolution had not arrived yet?

Finally, choosing some likely title to read, I quietly took off the noisy wrappers of the candy secreted in my pockets and popped the goodies into my mouth. I ate the

delicious words on paper that would expand my world and take me to places I could only dream about.

Sometimes during my research into the world of adults, I would sneak looks of longing at the boys at the next table. I wanted to start conversations with these interesting creatures but was too shy and afraid to talk to anyone.

My love of books and reading were intertwined with my need for companionship. I am always curious about people and why they do what they do. Reading provides entry into new worlds and recounts history of times past. I continue to question and process the world around me with a curious eye.

Leave no stone unturned; ask why? How does the process work? How do the pieces of the puzzle fit together to make a whole? There is nothing allowed to slip by without wanting to know where it came from, how it came to be and how does it fit into this world.

## CHAPTER FIVE; ARTWORK

1. Silver leaves with turquoise center
2. Sterling silver lotus designs grouped in a triad.
3. Watercolor Jade plant in blue pottery container.
4. Apple pie with demerara sugar topping.
5. Textured patterned dish with green grapes.
6. Red watercolor flowers for greeting card.
7. Large hand thrown bowl with crackle finish.
8. Nerikome technique with bleu and lavender clay.
9. Hammered copper cover with pottery base.
10. Assembly of pots for a show.
11. Chair and lamp view from my watercolor table.
12. Brushes and water for watercolor painting.
13. Watercolor flowers with black ink outlines.
14. Sterling silver necklace with brass bee stamping soldered on with black rubber cord.



Sterling silver leaves with turquoise center stone. The leaves are oxidized.





Sterling silver lotus designs grouped in a triad.



Watercolor Jade plant in blue pottery container.



Apple pie with star-shaped designs and Demerara sugar coating.



Textured pottery dish (ancient antique gold glaze) with green grapes.



Red watercolor flowers for greeting card.



Large, hand-thrown bowl with crackle finish and decorative gold rim.



Nerikome technique with blue and lavender porcelain.



Hammered copper cover with rose adornment on hand-thrown porcelain pot.





Grouping of hand-thrown clay pots for a show.



Chair and lamp view from my watercolor table.



Brushes and water for watercolor painting.



Watercolor flowers with black magic marker outlines.



Sterling silver necklace with brass bee stamping on a black rubber cord.

## SCHOLARLY PORTION: TO THE WAREHOUSE

Coming of age in the 20-21st Century, aging in American society, the position of women, professional involvement, family stories, sociology observations, gift giving in America, volunteering, stories of children and pets, cooking, and artwork are the topics I examine in this dissertation.

It is not a coincidence that I chose the title of my dissertation, *To the Warehouse* as inspired by Virginia Woolf. In her memoir, *Moments of Being*, she brings to light remembrances of her earlier life that stood out for her as time went by. In her writing, I recognize parallels to my life that are meaningful and important. She writes with honesty and a sincere appeal which I want to emulate in my stories of children and pets and people and events in the Restore warehouse upon which I comment. Woolf brings the technique stream of consciousness to her writing, a literary style that allows the reader insight into the author's inner thoughts. She allows us into her internal dialogue by seeing the narrative through her vision.

An example of Woolf's childhood memory is in her memoir *Moments of Being* (78). She recalls a childhood memory, "What then has remained interesting? Two I always remember. There was the moment of the puddle in the path; which for no reason I could discover, everything suddenly became unreal; I was suspended; I could not step across the puddle; I tried to touch something...the whole world became unreal."

When I remember my childhood, I feel time suspended in recalling the time and place of that memory. It is as though time stops with the vision of the sunny day on the street with my friends or the discovery of the newly built Parkway at the end of my neighborhood while riding my bike. The world is unreal because it no longer exists, only in my recollections. Woolf tells her stories at a time when women's voices were not significant. She had little control over her body, finances, and career path. She writes in a stream of self-awareness that is honest and compelling. She can let the reader see her world through her eyes in a straightforward and uncomplicated manner.

In another instance, she says, "Then one day, walking round Tavistock Square, I made up, as I sometimes make up my books, *To the Lighthouse*; in a great, apparently involuntary rush. One thing burst into another. Blowing bubbles out of a pipe gives the feeling of the rapid crowd of ideas and scenes which blew out of my mind so that my lips seemed syllabbling of their own accord as I walked." (*Moments of Being*, 81)

Woolf talks about the experience of writing as an existential experience. The ideas overtake her, and she becomes the vehicle for writing rather than trying to put words on paper. When I throw pottery on the wheel or design jewelry it is the essence of this out-of-body experience that causes a piece of artwork to be created. Sitting down on the potter's wheel with a blob of squishy clay begins the process of becoming one with the materials by forming a bowl or cylinder. The writing process is still more difficult as the words get in the way of picturing a lucid experience and showing what needs to be seen from my inner eye. The craft of writing requires more time and patience to develop into a worthy art form. Designing space or integrating modular pieces is less complicated due to the long experience with the process.

I recognize Virginia Woolf and her struggles for autonomy and self-expression. Woolf lived in an age controlled by her father and brother. She had no control over her property or life. In the 20th century, women in medicine and science were fraught with similar constraints due to being female. Girls were allowed to become secretaries to men running offices, teachers of small children, or nurses helping doctors. Women with law degrees were asked how well they could type, not how well they fared in their law classes. Sandra Day O'Connor, a Supreme Court justice, had difficulty finding a law job but needed her secretarial skills to be considered for work. If teachers became pregnant, they had to leave their teaching jobs. Nurses carried bedpans and did the menial work that doctors were not asked to do. This century has seen a turnabout in women in the workforce acquiring advanced degrees and holding better jobs. When I attended pharmacy school in from 1966 to 1971, only ten percent of the student body was female. Six years later, when my sister went to college for pharmacy, the percentage of women rose to thirty percent female. An article in *Pharmacy Times* written on October 12, 2021, titled, "Women Pharmacists Day: The evolution of Women's Role in Us Pharmacy Practice" (*Pharmacy Times*), says, "As of 2020, approximately 62%-75% of the pharmacist in the United States are female. (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics from the Current Population Survey) That is a dramatic rise from the approximately 14% proportion that existed in the mid-1960s and would have been an almost unimaginable amount just a century ago." The commonly held belief was that males could understand math and science more efficiently and that females were naturally more verbal. Women were expected to conform to these modes; therefore, they were considered true!!



Another author I wish to emulate because of her clarity and exposure to the inner thoughts of her characters is Elizabeth Strout. The stories of *Olive Kitteridge*, written by Strout, are another model I use for my dissertation. She is a retired math teacher in a small town in Maine. The tales are loosely linked together to form a whole novel. The creative portion of this dissertation is partly a memoir and life writing of growing up in suburbia, attending professional school to become a pharmacist, raising children, and working in my profession. The stories Strout tells are held together in a series of tales concerning Olive, her friends, or her children. The narratives I recount are meant to emulate this writing form.

Olive is insightful and cantankerous. She sees life through a lens of reality, often unvarnished with social nicety. Many of her family members and children suffer losses, but she continues with her life. Olive brings a sharply critical analysis of situations such as going to a baby shower and not wanting to be there because she does not fit into the silliness of the situation. I can readily understand her point of view, having been caught in a similar setting. She is a complicated person who brings recognizable truths to the vignettes. The novel explores the twists and turns in everyday life and what it means to bring happiness or cause despair. Sometimes she is funny or sarcastic, which I appreciate. Often I see life through an ironic lens which may be critical and analytic. I want to know why the event or person reacts to the situation. She seems brash and often cranky but is kind and thoughtful at heart.

The first page of *Olive Kitteridge* is titled "Pharmacy." The author introduces the reader to Henry, Olive's husband: "For many years, Henry Kitteridge was a pharmacist in the next town over, driving every morning on snowy roads, or rainy roads, or

summertime roads when the wild raspberries shot their new growth in brambles along the last section of the town before he turned off to where the wider road led off to the pharmacy.” (1). Henry is retired now, as am I. In my pharmacy section, I wrote short stories about driving to Morris Plains Pharmacy, where I worked for thirty-five years. I can understand going to the store over snowy roads to be able to open the store first. The story in my paper is called “Early Morning in the Pharmacy,” where I parallel the events described in Strout’s book.

The following paragraph describes the procedure for opening precisely as I remember. She writes, “Each morning Henry parked in the back by the large metal bins, and then entered the pharmacy’s back door, and went about switching on the lights, turning up the thermostat, or, if it was summer, getting the fans going. He would open the safe, put the money in the register, unlock the front door, and wash his hands, put on his white lab coat.” (*Olive Kitteridge*, 1) Although, we no longer wear white lab coats, only plastic name tags pinned to our shirts. The writing is clear and accurate; I emulate the pictures she draws for the reader. In my pharmacy tales, I describe the quiet and soft darkness of opening the store first thing in the morning, listening to the phone messages, and counting the cash in the register.

Later in the collection of interlocking stories, Strout describes Olive when she is sixty-nine, “And while Olive had ever been in anyone’s memory felt inclined to be affable or polite, she seemed less so now as this particular June rolled around.” (104). These lines are funny and caustic but bitingly honest. Humor is a way of bringing truth to the light of day; it cuts to the core of a situation holding a mirror up for the reader to evaluate the situation more clearly.

Sometimes Olive is not as self-assured or brave as she would like. Strout writes, “Olive had never been on a plane by herself. Not that she was by herself now, of course; there were four other passengers with her on this plane, which was half the size of a greyhound bus. All of them had gone through security with the complacency of cows; Olive seeming the only one with trepidation. She had to remove her suede sandals and the big Timex watch of Henry’s that she wore on her wrist” (202). This writing is very observant and funny; Olive tells the reader exactly what it feels like to board a plane and go through security. No one likes to take off their shoes for the TSA! My short stories try to give the reader a realistic view through my eyes of life in the pharmacy or being with children and animals.

The stories I tell of animals, children, pharmacy, and working in the Restore Warehouse parallel the loose link of the narratives of Olive; they are wry accounts of observing people I come into contact with as I come to terms with understanding my contributions and the position of my life. My stories may not be earth-shaking, but they are clear remembrances of someone who stands back and listens, tries to understand motivation, and leaves a record of time in this century. I was often taught to listen to what people say, evaluate the ideas, and then understand how the person arrives at that thought. My father, a psychologist, was told he could read minds. He could not, but he listened carefully and heard more than the spoken words. I emulate his skills in understanding people. It is called listening with the third eye or hearing more than the spoken word.

The twentieth and twenty-first century is a time of upheaval and turmoil in women's lives; what are women's proper roles? Can we have it all? Can we be mothers

of small children, caretakers of elderly parents, and work full-time in demanding professional roles? What does it mean to retire at sixty-five in a culture that adores youth? This dissertation proposes to explore retiring and volunteering opportunities available to women today.

Retirement age is based on Otto von Bismarck's government in Germany in 1881 (*How Retirement was Invented*). It was configured to grant government support to older members of society. Most people worked on farms until they died. This plan set up a retirement program to provide for the aging population. As a retired person at sixty-five, I have many opportunities to explore.

Most people did not live that long. "In the United States, starting in the mid-1800s, certain municipal employees- firefighters, cops, teachers, mostly in big cities- started receiving public pensions, too. In 1875, the American Express Company started offering private pensions. By the 1920s, various American industries, from railroads to oil to banking, were promising their workers some support for their later years." (*How Retirement was invented, 1*) The social programs chose sixty-five years of age as a reasonable retirement age. Some arguments were that the worker had decreased mental acuity and had done enough good work. Life expectancy for American men in 1935 was around 58 when the Social Security Act was passed. The payments were not expected to outlive life expectancy (*How Retirement was Invented, 2*).

When I stopped working, I looked for activities to allow me to interact with other people outside the home: Purple Apron, a division of Nourish. NJ was my first choice in the volunteer world. This group lists ingredients for recipes to feed a family of four. The recipes are nutritious and simple to prepare. Instructions for preparing the meals in

English and Spanish are stapled to the sack, along with a letter of encouragement. The ingredients are put in a paper grocery bag, delivered to the pickup site, and offered to people with food insecurity, no questions asked. This was fun, but I still needed to fulfill my need to interact with people one-to-one. I offered to work in the soup kitchen preparing meals for clients, but the COVID-19 pandemic made this dream impossible. We were not allowed to enter the building site for fear of spreading the virus.

Below is an example of one of the choices.

*Bean and Barley Soup with Sliced Apples*

2 apples, any variety

1-quart vegetarian broth or stock

1 pound bag or box of barley

One 16-ounce can of pinto beans

One 16-ounce can of diced tomatoes with basil

One medium onion

1 pound bag of carrots

One bunch of celery

Instructions for preparing the meals in English and Spanish are stapled to the sack, along with a letter of encouragement. The ingredients are put in a paper grocery bag, delivered to the pickup.

Next, I applied to Planned Parenthood to work at their clinic, recording intake histories, but I needed someone to answer my application; probably due to COVID-19 restrictions, no one was in their office. I had run galas and fundraisers for this group when I worked at the community pharmacy. The Morris Museum was another choice for

volunteer work. They responded that I needed a degree in Fine Arts to be a docent, not a Master's Degree in Literature. I could have easily memorized the information to lead a gallery group. The Food Pantry in Morris Plains was not interested in my talents, either. They are a closed enclave with volunteers supplied by a local church. I began to feel unwanted and unneeded by society. I was starting to feel like all I could do was read books, make pottery, and cook lavish meals. It is essential for social interaction and a sense of group identity as one ages.

I worked as a community pharmacist in a small, "Mom and Pop" non-chain drug store nearby for thirty-five years. I am used to standing on my feet for many hours, eating lunch while working at the computer while getting people the drugs and services they require. I like talking to the public, listening to their stories, and providing a responsive ear. As one ages, the possibilities for social interaction diminish, along with many other capabilities. Women become invisible, no longer pretty, or thought of as capable of learning new technology. Fashion magazines show the latest clothes on slim models with tight leggings or short skirts unfit for senior citizens. Youth culture is touted; wrinkles are seen as unwanted signs of aging, not signs of living well. Over the years, I needed to know four new computer systems as they emerged. When I began as a pharmacist, prescriptions were typed on a typewriter and logged into a journal with pen and ink. The new online pharmacy programs were challenging and counter-intuitive-but I learned to use them!

I was beginning to despair! My husband suggested the Habitat for Humanity warehouse in Randolph, N.J. He likes their welcoming attitude and the barrage of interesting merchandise donated to the store. Finally, I gave in and applied to be a

volunteer at this site. Volunteering allows me to meet new people daily, help them with their purchases, and contribute to society in a meaningful way. I am a crone, using my experience in a new way, giving me a sense of purpose, and engaging with the community. It never occurred to me that so much of what I had learned as an artist and the marketing skills gained in the pharmacy could transfer to making donations in the warehouse presentable and saleable. I can “see” space and orientation to show goods to their best advantage. I can listen with a sympathetic ear to fellow employees and customers. I learned new computer systems quickly due to knowing new pharmacy systems as the years went by and workspaces changed. When I walk through the warehouse, I feel a sense of accomplishment and pride to be able to contribute to this non-profit that builds homes for people. The volunteers and paid employees often turn to me for advice on the value of donated items. I keep quiet until they are finished with their questions; then, I offer my assistance as a source of information garnered over long years of training.

This dissertation allows me to explore the opportunities to volunteer as a retired person capable of working and contributing to society. Habitat for Humanity, The Restore, gives my dissertation a wealth of material to contemplate.

Baggett writes, “Contrary to the widely accepted Enlightenment paradigm, which forecasts the inexorable privatization of institutional religion and thus its increasing irrelevance for inciting civic participation, Habitat exists as a distinctly public manifestation of religious conviction that is compelling enough to mobilize thousands of American volunteers each month” (*Habitat for Humanity*, 5). This statement holds much truth as I see volunteers of high school age and retired men and women giving their time

to do some public service. The high school teens are given honor credit for volunteering for twenty hours; the credits are added to their college applications. Retired people participate in the warehouse, forming a community of caring adults who want to continue contributing to society after their primary employment has ended. Beneficiaries of affordable housing or reconstructed homes add to the mix by logging in five hundred hours of required work to qualify for this aid into the middle class. The Restore (selling space) of Habitat enables people to act upon their long-held beliefs for helping families to have affordable housing for people unable to live in safe neighborhoods. Volunteers can direct this process or “put your money where your mouth is.” This is hands-on, not simply writing a check and forgetting about one’s commitment to creating a better, more equitable world. The volunteers can interact with paid warehouse employees, students, and people working the required hours to qualify for housing. The opportunity to mix with more than just middle-class white America is afforded by volunteering for Habitat for Humanity.

Does it make sense to work for no pay-free? After a long career as a pharmacist, I find it valuable to share my knowledge of merchandising goods and services and my acquired skills of listening to the needs of others. Working in the warehouse allows me to use my expertise to train new volunteers and interact with customers and workers. Feeling valuable and important becomes the payment for the right actions that money cannot buy. In the section called “Tales of the Warehouse”, the vignettes recounted talk about these ideas of teaching my skills and interacting with people in The Restore.

When I give my skills and talents to the warehouse, I am putting my values of contributing to making a more equitable society to work. The payback is being able to



provide new housing or repair old dwellings. Families should have clean food and safe places to live. This idea puts the belief in religion in the public sector. Baggett writes, “Voluntarism also implies that freely chosen, expressive values upon which voluntary associations are typically founded drive their everyday activities. There is a certain non-rationalized quality to voluntarism” (*Habitat for Humanity, 10*). At some point in life, acquiring money and things takes a back seat to performing public service for people in need. Humans must bring equality and fairness to society that mimics the right ethical ideas. Everyone deserves enough to eat, decent housing, and safe schools in a community with enough money to spend on endless Christmas decorations. Baggett says, “Central to both Christianity and Judaism; it depicts a God actively engaged in the struggles of history and insistence that people abide by ethical norms that supersede civil law” (21).

People, each and every one, can contribute to the common good to have a more ethical and stable society. Building fair housing or contributing to food banks is a small part of ensuring this goal. “Participation, putting time into timeless, ethical values, making a difference in a seemingly indifferent world - these experiences make these groups popular and allow people to feel like the subjects of their own religious lives” (*If I Had a Hammer, 91*).

Simply said, putting thought into action; being transactional! Habitat takes the Judeo-Christian ideals of feeding the poor and housing the downtrodden into bite-sized portions to be realized by caring volunteers to a concrete level. Even small contributions added together can amount to enough funds to build houses. The government does not

have to solve all of society's problems of society but grassroots community-level work can significantly contribute to changing lives.

David Rubel in *If I Had a Hammer* uses the word “parademoninational” throughout the book. This powerful statement bypasses individual sects or religions to reach out to ordinary people to come together and change society for the good of the many who cannot afford to partake in middle-class society. I explore the opportunities to volunteer as a retired person capable of working and contributing to the community. Habitat for Humanity, The Restore, gives my dissertation a wealth of material to contemplate.

While volunteering at The Restore, I tell the stories of customers and employees I observe. Christmas is one of the themes explored along with the myth of Santa Claus. This legend provides endless areas for wonder and research. The philosopher George Herbert Mead writes about social interaction theory, proposed in the early twentieth century. He comments on the relation of the objects to which we attach meaning to understand our immediate universe. It focuses on human relationships with the symbols that help define the encounters in our life. People assign definitions to things around them based on their evaluation of interplay with others. When the image of Santa Claus is observed in American society today, one instantly recognizes the man in the red velvet suit as kind and benevolent; he brings presents to children when they behave correctly. He is a patriarchal image that reinforces parents' admonitions to act positively. Words are not needed to understand the message. It is linked from the parent to the child, internalized, and echoed throughout society.

The social construct is based on the meanings we attach to social interactions and events. The intention isn't inherent in the object but assigned by society. If one were to show an isolated tribe in Africa the icon of Santa Claus, they would not react in the same way as an American child in the twenty-first century. Perhaps the naive child would be afraid of someone in a red suit who was fat and grinning. Elves might be seen as dangerous evildoers from which the youngster should be protected.

American children are taught from toddlerhood to recognize Santa as the icon of Christmas through interactions with their parents and society at large. The mythic image is so ingrained into the culture by the mutual assent of the civilization that it is difficult to criticize or understand on an intellectual level. The commercialization coopts the religious value of the holiday to the point that much of the spiritual orientation needs to be recovered.

As a child of ten, I told my friend that her parents brought a gift to her on Christmas morning, not Santa Claus. I stepped into a minefield of social constructs that I was too young to understand. Later, as an adult, trying to sell a life-sized doll of a man in a red suit to a customer in The Restore, I again walked into emotionally charged conflict areas. In the "Tales of the Warehouse" section, I tell the story of the life-size figure of Santa Claus used for decoration. Myths are the stories society tells to reinforce the values of their civilization. They have meaning and purpose; they are non-rational and speak to emotions, not the intellect. As an outside observer of this mythic image, I continue to explore the possibilities of this iconic myth.

American culture supports the use of the idealized image of Santa Claus to inculcate the child through the use of an actual, physical image to represent God. The

German philosopher of the nineteenth century, Max Weber, defines social action as “an act carried out by a person after carefully thinking about it” (*From Max Weber*, 184). He proposes that society supports the iconic personification of the Santa Claus figure. It is an agreed-upon construct reinforced by the vast commercialization in American society.

Comedy provides a scathing look at this mythic personification. David Sedaris is another author I turn to explain America’s fascination with the season of extreme gift-giving. He looks at life through a cracked mirror to discover the truth. “The Santaland Diaries,” a story in *Holidays on Ice* recounts his time as an elf at Macy's department store during Christmas. He needed money to live in New York City, so he took a temporary job. As one of Santa’s helpers, he recounts with joy and wit the pitfalls of the mass marketing of Christmas. Humor provides the mirror he holds up for the reader to look at the seedy underbelly of selling a product in the form of toys and photos for the holidays.

Sedaris writes, “Is this the Christmas your holiday dreams come true, or is it the day you discover just how petty and spiteful one person can be? If, like her, you’re not interested in money, cars, and appliances. You could still convince her to sign the contract and then donate your rewards to charity” (*Santaland Diaries*, 92). Throughout this story, he brings to light the failings of a people entrenched in the commercialization of the holiday. Sedaris helps me explore the myth's meaning, leading to the gift-giving custom. The whole experience of waiting in line with small children to sit on a stranger's lap and ask for toys is emotionally bereft of meaning.

Sedaris goes into, “Santa Santa has an elaborate little act for the children. He’ll talk to them and give them a hearty chuckle and ring his bells, and then he asks them to name their favorite Christmas carol. Most of them say, ‘Rudolph, the Red-nosed

Reindeer.’ Santa Santa then asks if they will sing it for him” (Santaland Diaries, 94). The sarcasm in Sedaris’ writing is palpable! It makes me laugh to read this essay; it is pure sarcasm at its best!

This story stays with me as I wonder about the importance and meaning of this very American mythology. The Dutch probably brought the American Santa Claus to New York in the 1900s. This is a critical icon valued by our culture today.

Another mid-century writer adored during my high school years was the “Shep,” as he was referred to. Humor has a way of cutting to the truth of the situation by making it more palatable. Elizabeth Strout, David Sedaris, and Jean Shepherd observe human behavior and gently criticize our failings by allowing us to laugh; the central core of truth is evident. Jean Shepherd also tells his involvement with Santa Claus and his belief or disbelief in the whole gift-giving process. He reflects on stories on the radio that we often listened to for entertainment. He recounts his needing to believe in the truth of the Santa story as a boy in a small suburban area. “He was an American storyteller, humorist, radio and TV personality, writer, and actor. With a career that spanned decades, Shepherd is known for the film *A Christmas Story* (1983), which he narrated and co-scripted, based on his own semiautobiographical stories” (Eugene Bergman).

Jean Shepherd writes about Christmas coming to the department store in his town. He describes a catalog advertisement in *Open Road for Boys*: “Its Christmas issue weighed over seven pounds, its pages crammed with the effluvia of the Good Life of male Juvenalia until the senses reeled and Avariciousness, the growing desire to own everything, was almost unbearable”(A Christmas Story,4). He evokes a real need to have the objects he desires. When his parents take him to visit Santa, he doubts the validity of

the man in the red suit, but he wants to buy into the myth. He says, “Maybe that was it! My mind reeled with the realization that maybe Santa did know how rotten I had been and that the football was not only a threat but a punishment. There had been a theory for generations on Cleveland Street that if you were not a ‘good boy,’ you would reap your desserts under the Christmas tree” (*A Christmas Story*). Shepherd greatly desires a Red Ryder BB gun, as seen in the advertisement, but he is so awed by Santa that he is speechless and settles for a football. He is horrified by his inability to tell Santa his deepest desire but continues to advocate for this present to his parents. He finally gets his heart’s desire from Santa. He promptly goes outside to target practice, but the beebee ricochets off and breaks his glasses, just missing his eye! He was forewarned of this danger and lied to protect his shattered honor! Sometimes we get more than what we need or want!

The modern meaning of Santa Claus emphasizes children; getting presents, believing in a mythic figure, and behaving to receive gifts. He is a non-threatening presence who coaxes good actions.

John R. Gillis, in *A World of Their Own Making*, writes, “It is above all things a children’s feast, and the elders who join in it put themselves upon their children’s level .... At no time in the world’s history has so much been made of children as today. Because Christmas is their feast, its luster continues unabated in an age upon which dogmatic Christianity has largely lost its hold, which laughs at the pagan superstitions of its forefathers. Christmas is the feast of beginnings, of an instinctive, happy childhood” (103) .

Santa became the eternal grandfather figure, bestowing gifts with great glee and good nature. “The Night before Christmas” by Clement Moore, written in 1822, solidified the story for the American public. Thomas Nast, the American illustrator, gave him his current costume and image. In 1931, Coca-Cola hired an illustrator, Haddon Sandblom, to paint Santa for their advertisements. He became a warm, happy character

with human features, including rosy cheeks, a white beard, twinkly eyes, and laugh lines (Coca-Cola Company).

This is a male-centric holiday, with the women buying gifts, cooking meals, and serving. Santa is a benevolent male figure supported by the females in the house. The mother shops for presents for everyone in the family, decorates the real or fake tree, and cooks extravagant meals for guests to celebrate the holiday. Also, stockings must be filled with small items, called “stocking stuffers,” to round out the complete picture.

The Elf on the Shelf begins to change the iconography of this myth. *The Elf on the Shelf; A Christmas Tradition* is a 2004 children's storybook authored by Carol Aebersold and her daughter Chanda Bell and illustrated by Coë Steinwart. The story is about Christmas in rhyme. The book explains how Santa Claus knows who is naughty and nice. The tale describes how elves visit children between Thanksgiving and Christmas Eve to report to Santa on children's good or bad behavior. The elves then return to the North Pole until the following year. This new interpretation of an iconic figure representing God watching over children updates the image to a modern iconology.

I am one of many to struggle with telling stories to small children about the myth of Santa Claus. Brit Bennett, the author of *The Vanishing Half*, June 2020, relates the story of a mother who wants to tell her daughter the truth about Santa but meets resistance from her husband. This is another example of the need to uphold the fantasy associated with childhood. She writes, “On Christmas morning, she leaned against Blake’s chest, watching her daughter squeal and dive into her pile of gifts. “A Talking Barbie that spoke when you pulled her chord, a Suzy Homemaker oven set, a red Spyder

bicycle. Look at this, look at that; she must have been such a good girl this year! Unlike all those rotten poor children staring at empty trees who must have deserved it, bad because they were poor, poor because they were bad.” The mother goes along with the father’s wish to maintain her daughter’s innocence, although she feels anguish at being complicit in this lie. The father says, “It’s just a little story; ... It’s not like she’ll hate us when she figures it out.”(221). Unfortunately, the whole family is living in a world of untruths.

The children are the links between these stories; it is essential to bring the child into the center of the gift-giving tales of Santa Claus because of the symbolic interaction. Society relies on this mythic image to speak to the young person on a non-rational level. The message is clear without the use of words. Santa Claus is the tangible image of a god; he rewards good behavior and eschews bad behavior. This is a subtle nudge towards developing the superego or moderator of the personality. As the child realizes that parents bring presents, not this mythic being, the message is already incorporated into the psyche. This is a child-centric view of life, especially important during the holidays.

The images of Santa Claus are a reaction to the times. The 1930s in America brought bread lines and poverty due to the stock market crash. Santa is depicted in brilliant red color with a luxuriant white beard. He is overweight and happy, which most of the population is not. His belt is broad and black with a large, expensive buckle reminiscent of the Pilgrim’s costumes. Perhaps the message in the Coca-Cola advertisements is to drink this sugary beverage, and you will be fat and jolly also. As time goes by, weight and nutrition become more of an issue.



*The Elf on the Shelf* gains popularity at a time when body image has changed. The Elf is androgynous, thin, and mobile. He or she can sit on a shelf or move to other sites as the parent see fit to solidify the message; you are being watched and judged on your actions. Also, as the structure of houses changed, chimneys and fireplaces were replaced by central heating. Contemporary children more easily understand the Elf on the Shelf; the main focus of modern life focuses on man and his needs rather than on the deity. Humans' day-to-day wants and needs replace fear and awe of God.

#### THE ELF ON THE SHELF POEM

I'm back from the North Pole

And have missed you my dears!

Santa has sent me again

To be his eyes and ears.

Every night I will fly

To give Santa advice,

Whether you were naughty that day,

Or wonderful and nice.

The rules are the same

And I hope you agree,

I can't talk to you

And you can't touch me.

But no worries, my sweet,

There is fun to share,

You never know when

I will show up somewhere.

Be aware, all you little children!

Poem by Bell Chandra and Carol Aebersold

This poem gives the same warning as Santa Claus; you must be good or behave to receive presents or the mercy of the watcher (God). If the child misbehaves, bad things happen. There is an inherent threat in the warning because he is watching, and you must be on your guard. This icon is one's first view of how god interacts in society in a tangible and recognizable form.

Harry Slochower is a teacher and philosopher who taught in New York City in the twentieth century. He writes, "Myth and religion, along with other cultural forms, are at one in their common attempts to get at a fundamental reality seen in symbolic transformation. However, what differentiates myth and religion, mainly from science and philosophy, is their anthropomorphic approach." (The use of Myth in Kafka and Mann, 45). Man is at the center of cultural stories (myth) rather than the interest in the cosmos, as seen by science. The images of the man or hero depicted by Santa Claus are concrete and understood by the current audience. The age of science allows us to "see" electrons in a scanning device; why not have visuals for the deity? The Elf mirrors this image in a tangible form. The child has the myth concretized by the parent, which allows for further belief in the infinite, which becomes the one god concept.

Toba Spitzer is a modern theologian who defines man's difficulty with visualizing an invisible and ineffable God. She writes in *God is Here*, "And even though the religions differ greatly on how explicit we can be about God's humanlike qualities, most people who talk about god use very human language to describe what God does and what

God is. God knows God acts, God loves, God judges, God gives and takes away life”

(3). Again, Santa reiterates the need for formalization and concrete imagery to understand God. As adults, we think we are too sophisticated for this visualization of the ineffable, but are we? The child needs to visualize God to understand the importance of the ineffable and unknowable. Santa Claus provides the child with a concrete image of the deity, which foretells the belief. Santa watches the child to see if they are good or bad, rewards good behavior with gifts, and punishes bad behavior.

The following research topics are observing gifts and the importance of gift-giving. People value things for many reasons, one of which is intrinsic value, another for comfort, and yet another for memories or nostalgia for past events.

Objects take on value as they are collected or given to people as presents; we remember the person who gave us the birthday present with fondness as time passes. The object itself may not have monetary value or significant intrinsic worth, but the present brings back warm memories of the time and place of receiving the item. We had nostalgia for that period when we were loved and cared for.

The book *Love Objects* is a collection of essays that looks at various types of gifts and the people who collect them. It focuses on the reactions of the receiver and the giver of the objects. The stories uncover the deeper meaning of possessing things and their psychological effect.

Louise Purbrick writes in her book *Love Objects*, a collection of essays that looks at various types of gifts and the people who collect them. She writes in ‘I Love Giving Presents, “People become attached to things. ‘All my presents hold fond memories for me,’ wrote a retired Post Office worker of the wedding presents she received in 1954”

(*Love Objects*, 10). The longing to have gifts nearby is a means of reliving the experience of the gift and the times in one's life when it was given. We cannot put the time in a bottle, but we can experience the pleasure of that era by looking at or holding on to the object represented. Things get their "hooks" in us through imported value; the object by itself has no import, only that of nostalgia for an event or a time that has passed.

The ancient poem of *The Odyssey* brings me back to the origins of my scholarly work at Drew. It holds up a mirror to society that has lasted to this century. People may live in different places and have warmer houses and food in a cellophane package from the supermarket, but the human psyche remains constant. We all need connection and love, and caring. Odysseus in *The Odyssey* had "nostos," longing for home and the comforts he remembered. He yearns to return to his wife Penelope and his homeland. He recalled with fondness a time of contentment and love.

Objects may remind us of the past, but alienation ensues when there is too much of a good thing or stuff for the mere sake of having more goods. Purbrick talks about emotion in material culture, "To consider material forms as repositories of affection and not of just desire, of longing as opposed to preference, of love of all kinds, demands some rethinking of the status of object that is in capitalist and consumer culture" (*Love Objects*, 11). She suggests that if an object can foster the illusion of love, acquiring goods in our culture might bring fulfillment. Unfortunately, the commodity produces alienation, not the completion of the yearning for adoration. The experience of receiving the present does not engender tender memories and a renewed sense of warmth in the memory of the giver of the present or the occasion of the gift. The

associations we have to presents given by loved ones permeate the object; it produces a nostos or nostalgia is evoked.

Purbrick says, “the gift turns upon the association of the giver and gift. It does so because the giver never leaves the gift” (Love Objects, 12). When one wears or uses the object given, the giver is present at the time of use. The acceptance of the offering validates the person who presented the thing. Conversely when something is not valued, the memories are not positive, and the gift cannot be fondly used. Cheerful giving produces joy and acceptance of the giver. “It requires choosing , expending time, going out of one’s way, and thinking of the other as a subject” (17). The gift then has a reciprocal opportunity that the receiver must return the favor. Presents connect people through learning the presence of others and choosing them correctly. Sometimes a gift is selected from a catalogue, and everyone receives the same present. This blanket gift does not produce the same effect. The gift must be unique or speak of the giver’s intentions.

Christmas gift-giving is especially fraught with emotional import. Nostalgia for the warm feelings of family, dinners, and tree decorating color the acceptance of objects presented. In our material culture, everyone must be included in the presentation of small, wrapped articles that are fondly placed under the tree. Sometimes Santa Claus is the purveyor of this tradition. This mode produces a commodification of the object; it is not personal. How much of this well-meaning stuff is thrown away or recycled in Habitat Restores? Many of the obsessively bought goods are not needed or wanted. A real relationship between the giver and receiver is not engendered. In our materialistic society, objects try to replace the emotion and care of the gift giver. The feelings are hollow, and the memories are not pervasive.

When I was a child, we hung up stockings to wait for small gifts from Santa Claus because the custom was so pervasive in American culture. We knew no man would bring presents to our Jewish house if we were good, but it seemed like a lovely ritual; we belonged to the American culture. In *A World of Their own Making*, John Gillis writes, “Christmas established a successful precedent for the creation of a new kind of family time. You did not even have to be Christian to practice it: in the 1950s, a sample of American Jews showed that forty percent had Christmas trees. By this time, Hanukkah, a holiday that had been on the decline, was also undergoing a revival” (104). Nostalgia for times of family warmth and unity continues to drive this festival and, with it, gift-giving.

We ascribe meaning to the object by our relationship to the giver. The material itself does not import value, but the experience of the thing carries weight.

Jonathan Chapman writes, “Although we may assign a particular meaning to a given object, or material, meaning cannot exist outside the body. It is within us that meaning can be found” (*Love Objects*, 137). A fine French crystal vase may be expensive, but the experience of the person involved determines its value. The manufacturer often does not sign glass objects; they all look alike in time. The time and place of the giving are essential as it ascribes value to the receiver. Styles change over time; an object once considered beautiful might become fussy and ornate. The Restore receives hundreds of lovely vases that are not needed or wanted by the children of the once proud owners of the object; the value is lost.

The lasting attachment to things only happens in our society with more goods than we can use or need. Wonderful cut glass wine goblets are no longer looked at with pleasure because they require care to use and wash. This generation would just as well

have Ball canning jars to drink from because they need no time or effort to use. The outstanding craftsmanship of the glass etcher gives way to utilitarianism. There is no connection between the object and society. The ease of use replaces the function and the meaning of design.

What does it mean to own fine porcelain plates once used by royalty to serve our dinner? Do we feel special or deserving like queens when we eat off good china?

Jonathan Chapman writes, “Materials are powerful mediators and are so much more than just skins to wrap technology; they are grossly undervalued in terms of their potential to contribute to the meaningfulness of the human experience. Beyond their functional and practical properties, materials connect us to deeper narratives surrounding complex and thorny issues of self, culture, society, economy, and ecology” (Love Objects, 143). Our emotional experience of the material thing plays a huge role in accepting or rejecting the giver and the object.

The ancient Greeks had a rule of society that demanded gifts be given to travelers in the form of food and hospitality even before asking for the person's name or status. The name of this process is called *xenia*. It was thought that this social construct brought favor to the gods. “*Xenia* consists of three basic rules: The respect from host to guest, the respect from guest to host, and the parting gift from host to guest. The host must be hospitable to the guest and provide him with food, drink, and a bath if required. It is not polite to ask questions until the guest has stated his needs.” (Odysseus and the Cyclops).

Odysseus experiences *xenia* on his travels through the *Odyssey*, sometimes for good and sometimes not. When his crew is turned into pigs to be eaten is an example of how not to do *xenia*. More often, he is taken care of and given food and libations, as in

the tale of Circe. The gods, through Circe, provided all that Odysseus and his men needed when they landed on her island.

Another example of negative *xenia* is the Cyclops; “The Cyclopes are the most prominent example of this. They don’t understand the basic guest-host relationship. The Polyphemus Cyclops doesn’t realize that he is supposed to give a gift to people arriving at his house. He doesn’t know how to do it. He is not generous.” (Odysseus and the Cyclops). Instead of taking care of his guests, he prefers to smash their heads against the wall and eat them. Indeed, this sets a prime example for ancient societies on how not to behave.

In the Chumash: The Torah, this story is again played out in the section on Abraham when he has just been circumcised and is weak but runs to provide food and drink to his visitors. In chapter called Vayeira (18/1-8), Abraham says, “Let some water be brought and wash your feet, and recline beneath the tree. I will fetch a morsel of bread that you may sustain yourselves, then go on - inasmuch as you have passed your servant’s way.” This passage further lays out the critical idea of gift-giving that continues to modern times. Not only does Abraham feed his unknown visitors but he “runs” to do this service.

Over time, gifts have been an essential part of society. To acquire the king's favor, opulent presents were brought to court. Today, Christmas extends the tradition of presents for every man, woman, and child known to a person. Are we looking for favor from the gods or showing respect for others? The myth of Santa Claus suggests a way to control behavior by bringing presents only to deserving or good children.



When we visit someone's home, it is expected we bring something, such as a bottle of wine, candy, flowers, or a cake. Are these traditions rooted in the ancient idea of *xenia*? It seems to make sense to be thoughtful by bringing small tokens of appreciation for a visit or dinner party. Without a home-baked cake or other small offerings, I cannot go to a friend's house. Many goods offered to Restore were gifts given to people for Christmas, dinners, or appreciation. American society has taken the idea of *xenia* and extended it to the nth degree. We have so much stuff and don't know what to do with it. Donors rush to give the Restore stuff to keep it out of the overflowing landfills; we simply collect too much stuff!

In gift-giving societies, giving and receiving gifts are meaningful interactions between people. It is understood that the gifts are given freely but become reciprocal. Giving gifts creates expectations of reciprocity and is an essential form of social connection and cohesion. Or, to put it another way, the community that gifts together stays together. The modern celebration of Purim in the Book of Esther affirms gift-giving through food and treats given to friends and neighbors. Gift-giving confirms the values of the community by solidifying the gift and the gift-giver into interacting groups.

*Rashi's Daughters* explores the values and traditions of the 11th century. One of the holidays Maggie Anton writes about is Purim, a spring tradition. She says, "Purim celebrates how Queen Esther and her cousin, Mordecai, saved the Persian Jews from Prime Minister Haman's evil plan to exterminate them, Joheved explained succinctly. His scheme was thwarted when Esther convinced the king to nullify the decree" (185). The festival is celebrated by giving food to the poor and treats to one's neighbors. The whole community contributes to providing gifts for friends and neighbors, solidifying a

gift-giving society's social contract. The holiday of Purim cements this idea of reciprocity. The whole community creates bags of Haman Taschen, little toys, and noisemakers to be distributed to one's neighbor. Everyone participates by giving and receiving presents on this day of celebration.

The nineteenth-century German philosopher Marcel Mauss argued that gifts are never truly free: human history is full of examples of gifts bringing about reciprocal exchange. He questioned the power of the gift to cause the recipient of the gift to pay back. He wondered about the effect the present caused. "What power resides in the object given that causes the recipient to pay it back?" (*The Gift*) The answer has to do with the obligation inherent in receiving a gift. The gift carries a piece of the giver, causing an emotional response and the need to respond in kind. The giver does not merely give an object but also part of himself, for the object is permanently tied to the giver: The objects are never completely separated from the men who exchange them.

In a material-based society learning to shop is mandatory to fit in with the latest trends in fashion and style. Hiking and walks in the woods do not give one the prestige of having the latest in design and comfort. Mark Doty, an American poet, records his experiences with bargain hunting and collecting goods with charm. In *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*, he writes, "There is a whole community built around the reassessment and redistribution of things. It pretends to be concerned with value, and of course, on one level, it is; there are precious objects that escalate in price and represent concrete forms of wealth" (30). The goods flooding into the warehouse attest to this concept, but primarily things are ordinary or nearly worthless. The value attributed to an object is often one of sentimentality or memory.

Doty adds, “Things must go somewhere when they are relinquished; orphaned belongings must be placed, settled, in order to keep the world aright” (30). This idea of finding a good home for objects no longer needed is a constant desire of the customers to donate to the warehouse. People want to prolong the lifespan of their family's worldly possessions. They need to stop the crash of time; look back with fondness on events or parties when a loved one used the dish, cup, or glass. There is a sense of magic, holding on to time as it inevitably slips away.

Doty explains when he buys an old, chipped dish, “So with my platter under my arm, walking home, I feel linked to something in my mother’s childhood and my own; something of promise in it, something of collective memory” (39).

This paper looks at the meaning of things or objects people possess to make them feel happy or control their environment. Sometimes memories of childhood or times past are embodied in objects; sometimes, the item brings prestige or honor to the individual. The prime mover of ownership of goods is always a connection, linking to people and places. At the beginning of my research, I did not understand the constant interplay of possessions; I looked at things as objects, not their meanings. As time continues to enlighten my experience, I give less importance to collected objects and more value to interactions with friends and relatives. The journey I have been on has taken me through philosophers of sociology and thought that were introduced to me in college. I must have heard the messages in the lectures, although I do not remember the words. Books and ideas are a constant source of wonder and enlightenment for me. I love to wander through times and places, exploring “why” and “how.” Can the situation be different? Can I see the ideas in a new light? Can I change to meet the times, or will the events alter

my perceptions? I am grateful to have become a crone, a woman who has gained knowledge and wisdom through life experiences. I hope to impart my value system to help guide the next generation.

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