

Aebleskiver Philosophy

Æbleskiver Philosophy



Preface:

I claim to have 51% Danish ancestry because my paternal grandmother was a Dane and the matriarch of the family. In 2014, Ancestry.com analyzed my DNA, and they got it wrong because it didn't come back as Danish. I married a close to full blooded Norwegian and we had interesting discussions about the virtues of Danes vs Norwegians. But, common to all the Scandinavian's is the love of food and winter Æbleskiver feasts that are part of that heritage. In 2008 I was staying the winter in DePere, WI with my sister, technically my cousin, but more on that later. DePere has a suburb that is home to Lambeau Field, the Packers, and the frozen tundra This is a story about a great piece of philosophy that came out of a chance meeting at an Æbleskiver feast.

Kringla, kringle, lefse, krumkake, pickled herring, smoked oysters, and of course, lutefisk are great Scandinavian foods; well maybe lutefisk is an acquired taste only achieved by the heartiest souls, those with true Viking blood in their veins. You know the old story; the only reason the "old" Norwegians ate lutefisk at Christmas was to remind themselves why they never wanted to go back to the old country.



In 2004 my cousin Marilyn lost her husband and in 2005 I lost my wife. As the two oldest cousins, we leaned on each other as we went down the rough road of grief recovery. Marilyn had four sisters and I had one brother. On the journey down that road we developed a brother / sister relationship that we never had growing up. Now, we are more brother and sister than cousins and we have evolved into soulmates.

I stayed with Marilyn much of the winter of 2008 as we tried to figure out where this road of grief recovery was taking us. Actually living with your sister / brother, whom you thought you knew well, was an adventure unto itself. My story, Culture Shock, at garystrattonfirefighter.com tells about that adventure. I blew a lot of snow out of her driveway; she cooked a lot of food for me; I did some handyman work for her; we looked at houses for me, for her, and for us. We talked about things only two people who had lost a spouse at a young age could talk about. We went to church every Sunday, which was normal, and I experienced Lenten Services that still cling close to my soul. We partook in "Friday Night Fish," a semi-religion in Wisconsin, and we went to an Æbleskiver feast.

Æbleskiver feasts are plentiful in the Green Bay area during the winter. We chose to attend the one at St. Timothy Lutheran. Saturday was a cold, crisp, sunny day in Green Bay. The tundra was still frozen, but it was a nice day. We entered the church and made our way to the registration desk. We registered and proceeded to the waiting area, the sanctuary, and took a seat in a pew and waited with a hundred or so other people.

As I entered the sanctuary I looked up, and sure enough we were in a Danish Lutheran Church. It



felt like home although I had never been in that church. When Danish immigrants arrived in America, and formed a church, they had a tradition of hanging a model ship in the top of the sanctuary. The ship, mostly hand carved, was a replicate, or at least a representation, of the ship they were on during their migration. Besides my family heritage, in 1989 I visited Denmark on a business trip. Standing on Danish soil, not all that far from where my ancestors originated, gave me a strong connection to my Danish heritage.

While we were waiting, I noticed the decorated baskets at the front of the nave. My sister told me there were for the raffle to raise money for the church's activities. We went forward to explore the baskets. The beautiful baskets were decorated with ribbons and bows with many themed in the green and gold of the Packers. A wonderful array of gifts were on display. Cheese assortments, surprise surprise, local wines, candies, books, Packer paraphernalia, again surprise surprise. There were tea assortments for warming the soul during the winter days in the frozen tundra. Many baskets displayed crafts and were a witness to the great workmanship and creativity of the provider. The review of the baskets was like a day in an art gallery.

Tickets for the raffle were on sale in the fellowship hall next to the nave. Sis and I bought some tickets and placed a ticket in the can in front of the baskets we were interested in. No one ever called either one of us, again, surprise surprise. By the way, neither of us spends time in a casino.



Go figure.

We went back to a pew and continued waiting our turn. Shortly our name was called. We were directed downstairs to a large fellowship hall that seated about 200 people. An usher took us to our seats. Immediately we were served. This church knew how to run a large scale Æbleskiver feast in a very efficient manner. My hungry stomach and my taste buds were anxious to get started on the Æbleskivers, and then it happened.

Denise Jensen, a friend of sis's, who was helping serve the hungry crowd, came by to say hello. Now, my sis knows everybody in the Green Bay metro area, well almost everybody, so it was no surprise we would encounter one of her friends. After introductions, we tell Denise we are looking for a new place for Friday night fish. You just can't go to Wisconsin and not partake of Friday night fish with a Wisconsin brandy old fashioned. Denise tells us about a place in downtown Green Bay, Maricques Bar at 1517 University. She tells us it is excellent food, but it's not cheap. The "not cheap" part did not phase me. I like good food. Denise then leans over our shoulders and quietly tells us, "My philosophy is that life is too short for cheap food and cheap booze." Now that philosophy hit home to me and I've followed it ever since.

Some would call meeting Denise a coincidence, but I don't believe in coincidence. On that day, sis and I were meant to cross paths with Denise, and a piece of wisdom was passed during an Æbleskiver feast at a church where two or more gathered in His name. You can't plan this stuff folks.....it's the power of the Holy Spirit. Denise was a person who was brought into my life for a brief moment and left me with a memory that will last forever; and I have not met her since and may never meet her again. In my life, I have been blessed to have several of these "chance" encounters that have left me with positive messages that have stayed with me and will be memories forever. May you also be blessed in this way.

Sis and I went to Maricques Bar the very next Friday. Denise was correct, it was excellent food, and while not cheap, it was appropriate for the quality. We have been back several times over the years.



This Æbleskiver recipe came from:

<https://houseofnasheats.com/aebleskiver-danish-pancakes/>

Aebleskiver (or ebelskivers) are puffy Danish pancake balls and a traditional Danish dessert most often served during the Christmas season. Enjoy them year-round as a delicious breakfast treat!

Aebleskiver | Danish Pancakes

Prep Time

10 mins

Cook Time

10 mins

Total Time

20 mins

Course: Breakfast

Cuisine: European

Servings: 8 people

Calories: 223 kcal

Author: Amy Nash, House of Nash Eats

Ingredients

2 eggs, whites and yolks separated

2 cups all-purpose flour

1 tablespoon sugar

2 teaspoons baking powder

1/2 teaspoon baking soda

1/2 teaspoon salt

4 tablespoons butter, melted, plus extra for the pan

2 cups buttermilk

Instructions

In a medium bowl, beat the egg whites with an electric mixer until stiff peaks form.

In a separate, large bowl, combine the flour, baking powder, salt, baking soda, and sugar. Stir well, then add the egg yolks, melted butter and buttermilk and mix just until combined.

Gently fold the beaten egg whites into the batter. Batter will be fairly thick.

Heat your aebleskiver pan over medium heat until hot. Brush each cup with a little melted butter using a pastry brush, then fill each cup with about 2 tablespoons of batter until almost full.

As soon as the aebleskivers begin to bubble around the edges, use a wooden skewer, chopstick, knitting needle, or fork to flip them over half way, letting the batter slide around to fill in the bottom of the cup.

Continue cooking, turning the aebleskiver again to let the batter fill in the remainder of the sphere

and continuing to turn until golden brown all the way around and cooked through. Transfer to a serving plate and dust with powdered sugar, then serve with jam (traditional), honey, cinnamon honey (my favorite!), or even just syrup.

Grandpa Al's Boat Ride

Preface:

This true story is circa 1980.

Grandpa Al's Boat Ride

The Luders and Stratton families shared some of the best times of our lives on the shores of Lake Pepin in Lake City, MN. Bob, Cheryl, and their kids, Jeff, Jennifer, and Nick, had a camper at Suza's point and later moved to Smitty's Campground, and even later, they had a trailer on the north edge of Lake City. The Stratton's, Gary, Maxine, Galen, Kim, Garrett, and Karmin, stayed across highway 61 at the Sunset Motel and Resort in one of the kitchenette cabins.

My boat, a 14 ft Sears and Roebuck, with a small 6 hp motor and a short freeboard, wasn't big



enough the waters of Lake Pepin so we used Bob's bigger boat. Bob's boat was an old Naden boat. It was a heavy and tough 14 ft boat that was built like a battleship. Bob and I had been in rough water with it and had no problems. The outboard was a 15 hp Spiegel, yes, the catalog company. That outboard showed a lot of wear and tear but it ran like a sewing machine; never mind the stove bolts and wires, readily visible, that held it together. It had never let us down.

On this particular outing, Bob's folks, Al and Jo, were also camping and had set up their camper at Smitty's campground. Bob's dad, Grandpa Al, invited us over one afternoon so all of us gathered round the camp fire. As we got settled, Grandpa Al hauled out a case of beer. Now this was the old



days, a case of beer came in a heavy cardboard box and when the top was lifted off, there set 12 brown glass bottles, neatly separated from each other by cardboard dividers. Everybody new what was coming. Grandpa Al had found a bargain on a case of beer. He was semi-famous for finding deals on beer.

Bob and I liked a good cold beer, and had drank our share, but we were always skeptical about Grandpa Al's beer. Grandpa Al pulled two cold beers out of the case and gave them to Bob and me. We accepted the bottles of Western beer. Bob and I looked at each other with the same bewilderment, silently thinking, you ever heard of this stuff. We thanked Grandpa Al, and then Bob took the first swig from the neck of that brown bottle. His face turned funny shapes, like trying not to spit it out or choke, and he swallowed. I knew this was not going to be a good experience. If Bob made that kind of face over a swig of beer I was in big trouble because if he couldn't handle it; I sure couldn't.

I took a swig, knowing full well what was coming. That bottle of cheap Western beer was every bit as bad as Bob's face had described. I swallowed, but the bad taste was still there as Grandpa Al asked, "What do you think?" Wanting to be polite and not offend Grandpa Al, Bob and I mustered up all the ability our traumatized voice boxes could muster and said, "It's ok."

In our glory days, it didn't take Bob or me very long to put away a bottle of beer. On this day, I think we set a world record for how long it takes to down only the neck of a bottle of beer. My My.....that stuff was bad. Finally, it seemed like an eternity, Grandpa Al had to go into his camper to check on something. Immediately after Grandpa Al set foot in that camper, the grass under our chairs got watered with that bargain Western beer. The bottles went back in the box.

When Grandpa Al returned, he offered us another beer. We declined, telling him we had our own beer and we would let him enjoy the rest of his great bargain case of Western beer. He smiled. After that day, Bob and I drank only beer that came from bottles, cans, and kegs that were not labeled "Western".

Bob and I did a lot of fishing on Lake Pepin, a wide and long section of the Mississippi river between Minnesota and Wisconsin with Lake City, MN located more or less at mid-lake. Crappie and walleye were our favorite targets but what ever was biting was okay also. In the hot and muggy days of summer, when fishing was slow, we watched the gulls. When they flocked together and descended near the water, they were after their own meal of stripers. We followed them up and down the lake chasing schools of stripers on feeding frenzies. On a feeding frenzy, the stripers bit anything you pitched at them, and as fast as you could pitch it. We didn't even have time to swig a beer. That was some of the funnest fishing we did.

When we started fishing together I was a very inexperienced fisherman and had never fished from a boat in a river. A lake formed by a wide spot in the Mississippi River offered many educational opportunities and challenges. Bob taught me how to fish Lake Pepin, and I did well under his tutelage. Bob also taught me a lot about seamanship and how to understand the river currents and

waves. Waves from the weather, river barges, power boaters, and idiot boaters. Lake Pepin could produce waves on windy days and during storms. The worst waves occurred when winds from the southwest blew hard. The combination of the strong current of the Mississippi river flowing south and a strong south wind blowing north could form significant waves on the lake, and they demanded your respect. On such days when we chose not to fish, we had seen waves break over the bows of big barges heading south on the lake.

I had been with Bob many times when the water on Lake Pepin was rough and choppy, but it was not bad enough to quit fishing or to be concerned about getting back to the campground. It was rough enough for me to get motion sickness but I never puked over the side of the boat. Bob was skilled at boatmanship and I learned a lot from him about how to navigate in rough water. One of his philosophies, that I used but never really came to embrace, was "go as fast as you can, then the boat stays on top of the choppy water and it's a smoother ride."

Most often this philosophy was used in the fall when he and I would spend a few days of late October or early November on the last fishing adventure of the season. In the Fall, the north winds could create really rough water but it was not dangerous like when the south wind blew in the summer. The waves from the north winds had a longer period and were more rolling. While they could be very rough, they were more predictable than the waves from the south. When the water was really choppy I would set in the bow of the boat, with my back to the north wind, to hold the bow down. It was a job for which I had adequate weight to accomplish the task as we made the run back north to the camper. When we made this run we often had a beer. One time, a few years later, Bob had his new yellow Mirrocraft boat and Mercury outboard running flat out on the really rough water as we bumped from the top of a wave to the top of the next wave. In my mind, the theory of a smoother ride was in great doubt. I started yelling at him to slow down. He replied, "I can't, it'll be too rough." Holding onto the gunnel with one hand, I held out my half can of beer with my right hand. As me and the bow of the boat bounce around like a ping pong ball in a tornado, my beer can spewed forth foam like the Old Faithful Geyser. Bob held up his beer, in the smoother riding rear of the boat, and no foam. He just smiled and gave the throttle handle a twist to make sure it was full open. I sucked on the foam, and eventually we arrived safely at the beach. After that I saved my beer until we got back to the beach; you're never too old to learn new tricks, and Bob was a good teacher. This was a day memories were born. Some day when I get old, I hope memories like this will be the ones that float back to the surface. Even later, Maxine, Bob, Cheryl, and I are going to sit around heaven telling stories about the days at Lake Pepin.

In spite of the Western beer experience we still took Grandpa Al fishing with us when he wanted to go. One morning the three of us headed out in the that good old Naden boat, with the Spiegel catalog store outboard, and made our way across the lake to the Wisconsin shoreline. We started fishing a rocky bank area a little up river from Stockholm, Wisconsin. This was a shoreline area on the Wisconsin side that was one of our favorite crappie spots. It was an area where Bob taught me "if you are not losing tackle you're not in the right spot." I hated losing tackle, but I soon learned he was right. As Bob worked the boat up and down the shoreline we were catching a few crappies but fishing was not great. We did notice some clouds starting to darken far off on the southwest horizon, but we didn't pay close attention. Storms in that area usually moved away from us and we turned our attention to fishing and story telling.

In the midst of concentrating on the telltale peck of a crappie bite, we felt a sudden cool breeze pick up and looked back over our shoulders. The clouds were darkening and moving toward us, and the breeze turned to a wind. That cool wind was coming from the cold rain of a fast approaching thunderstorm. This was not good. The waves picked up and were quickly increasing in size. All three of us quickly reeled in, and Bob turned the boat around and pointed the bow into the waves. These waves were getting serious as we looked at each other. We couldn't stay where we were at

because we might get bashed into the rocky shoreline. Bob and I looked at each other and quickly decided we need to make a run back to the Minnesota side and the campground. If we tried to ride out the storm out on the lake, Cheryl, Maxine, and Jo, would be a nervous wreck. Not a good thing.

Bob and I both knew the urgency to do something; basically get the hell out of here and get back to the campground. This storm was going to get worse. We compared thoughts and made a plan. When Bob and I made plans together we were never in doubt. On rare occasions we might have been, maybe, a little wrong, but never in doubt about the success of the plan. If we were wrong, it was mostly about where the big fish would be biting today. The boat would handle the growing waves, now about 3 feet high, and we would have to run down river, into the waves, quartering the waves to keep from capsizing the boat. It would be a long run before we could turn ninety degrees and quarter with following waves and run up river toward the beach. It would be a rough ride. Grandpa Al listened to our discussion. As we put our life jackets on, we could tell he was not as optimistic about our chance of success as we were.

Bob had Grandpa Al sit on the floor in the middle of the boat and hold on to both sides. This would lower our center of gravity for better stability. I sat in the front of the boat for ballast to keep the bow from jumping up as we hit the on coming waves and so the wind would not flip us over backwards. Bob would use all of his boatmanship skills to handle the rough water. With a plan and everybody in position, we started our run. As Bob swung the boat around, I could see the wire and stove bolts holding that Spiegel outboard together. Denial about what might happen seemed the best choice.

The wind and waves were still picking up, and the lake was boiling in foamy water. We hit the first two waves, and Bob made some adjustments in angle and power. We hit the third wave and we traversed it well. Bob had it figured out, and we continued. All we had to do was keep our wits about us and not make any mistakes. We were young and had all the confidence young men have in themselves before they reach that age where realize they are not invincible. Bob and I weren't there yet. Grandpa Al never said a word, but the knuckles on his hands were starting to get white.

It was a rough pounding ride, and the thud of each wave hitting the bow didn't help increase our feeling of wellbeing. All three of us were getting wet. The wind was blowing spray from the whitecaps of the waves and strings of spray were hitting me in the face, and it stung. The wind drove the bow splash from the waves right at Grandpa Al, and he was soaked to the skin in no time at all. Bob was getting wet from the splash that missed Grandpa Al and the spray blown off the waves. The water was warm; we were getting wet but we were not taking on much water; we were successfully transversing every wave; and the boat was stable, so to speak. The plan was working.

It seemed like forever as we hit wave after wave after wave until we reached the turn point. Bob and I eyeballed the point on the beach where we needed to land. We told thoroughly soaked Grandpa Al what was going to happen and to hold on tight. I think the white knuckles and fingers



told us he was already doing that.

Bob was watching the waves to time the turn just right so we wouldn't capsize, and then he shouted out, "Here we go." His timing was perfect, and we made the turn, textbook. Bob started adjusting the speed to get us in sync with the waves so we wouldn't take a big wave over the stern and sink the boat. Quickly Bob got us in phase with the waves, and it seemed like the worst was behind us. The spray that was soaking Grandpa Al was greatly diminished, but his white knuckles and fingers did not reflect the improvement.

Now that the worst of the journey seemed to be over we turned our attention to the beach. By now we could see Cheryl and Maxine on the beach. They did not look happy. While Bob and I had been fully focused on each wave, the girls must have been watching us make the run down river into the waves. From their looks, I don't think they had the same confidence in our success as we did. As we continued to run with the waves, which were still running 3 to 4 feet, we needed another "never in doubt" plan on what to do when we hit the beach because it would be a rough landing.

Bob and I decided Grandpa Al would stay in the bottom of the boat holding on to both sides. Bob would time the waves so we would hit the beach in the trough of a wave. To secure the boat from the back wash of the waves, Bob and I would jump out of the boat and grab it. Bob would cut the motor and jump out of the starboard side of the boat. I would jump out on the port side of the boat. Both of us would grab the boat in the middle by Grandpa Al and sling the boat as far up on the sand beach as we could. We had a plan, and our confidence was high.

Bob got the timing just right, and we jumped out of the boat just as Murphy, of Murphy's Law, showed up. Back in those days Bob and I were still pretty quick, but we weren't quicker than the period between waves. Just as we got a good grip on the boat, a big wave showed up. It lifted the boat very high with Bob and me holding on tight, our arms extended above our heads,



hoping our feet didn't come off the bottom of the beach. As the boat started back down, our big eyeballs caught each other and together we slung the boat up the beach. The big wave helped us get the boat further up the beach.

So there we were, standing firmly on the sand beach of Suza's campground, three almost drown fishermen looking at two very unhappy wives. We got Grandpa Al's fingers pried from the side of the boat and got him out of the boat. He turned to Bob and me and said he would never going fishing with us again and headed off to find Grandma Jo. Well, after a while he changed his mind and went fishing with us.

Dealing with Grandpa Al was a lot easier than dealing with Cheryl and Maxine. They thought we might have capsized and drowned trying to make it to the campground. Well maybe..... but we had a plan. "Why didn't you go to the Stockholm pier and stay there," they asked. "Well, you girls would have been worried, we said, and besides, we didn't think of it." The look on the girl's faces and the sound of their eyes rolling around cannot be described in words, but Bob and I had seen it before. It's the look and sound that is not complimentary to the male gender.

As we drank a beer, Bob and I agreed with Cheryl and Maxine that next time the boat would go to the Stockholm pier and that Grandpa Al, Bob, and I would be in the Stockholm tavern. The girls could call to see if we were there; otherwise, they could worry.

Now for our grandkids, remember this was 25 years before smart phones. The girls would have to walk about a quarter mile to the Casey's gas station. They would be using the pay phone in the telephone booth outside the Casey's store. Then using change from their purse, they would insert a dime in the phone, put their finger in the 0 and spin the dial to call the operator. They would tell the operator they wanted to make a long distance call to the Stockholm Tavern in Stockholm, Wisconsin. The operator would tell them how much the three minute long distance call would cost. The girls would dig the coins out of their purses and drop them into the coin slots in the pay phone. When the correct amount was reached, the operator would dial the number. If the phone line was busy, they had to start all over. If your three minutes were about up, the operator would tell you to insert more coins. If you didn't the operator disconnected the line, and you had to start over.

As fate would have it, Bob, Grandpa Al, and I were never on the lake again when a surprise storm caught us before we could get off the lake, so our plan to spend an extended time marooned at the Stockholm Tavern was never implemented. Too bad, what could go wrong with a "never in doubt" plan like that?

The Good-Ol-Days



Cheryl and Maxine



Jeff Luders
Garrett Stratton
Galen Stratton



Bob and Gary Cleaning Fish



Bob with 7 lb Walleye



Bob, Jeff, Jennifer



Bob, with Bill & Betty Lindaman,
Cheryl's parents

The Story of Stump

Preface:

This is a true story. I was there the night of this momentous event. Most, but not all, of the Jaycees had nicknames, and I used them, or created them, for this story, and I know the history of some of those nicknames. Remember, I became a writer in my retirement so anything that happened in the past could become a story.

The Story of Stump

The guy soon to become known as Stump, moved to Hudson, Iowa over the 4th of July holiday in 1974 with his wife and two children. A few months before, he had lived in the Country Terrace Mobile Home Court a few miles north of town. While living there, a co-worker, Frito, knocked on his door. The Hudson Jaycees were selling grape jelly to support a charity of the Iowa Jaycees. Frito, who worked in the same building as Stump, approached Stump a few days later and asked him to join the Hudson Jaycees. Stump accepted, and to say his life, and his wife's life, was changed forever is an understatement (could there be more stories to be written???)

Stump was an active member, and his wife became active in the LBJ's (Ladies Behind the Jaycees). They both participated in Jaycee and LBJ community projects. They attended management and leadership courses offered by the national Jaycee organization. Combined with the leadership skills they learned as members of Amway, together they began their journey to be active members of their new home, the Hudson Community.

They made many new friends and their social life became more active than it was the previous ten years when they lived in rural areas and the mobile home court. The Hudson Jaycees social life functioned via a men's group, a lady's group, and a couples group.

On a hot and sultry Friday night in the summer of 1975 a small group of the guys decided to go out and gig frogs for a frog leg feast. Frito, Thumper, Smuck, Snyd, Sparky, and Stump loaded up a couple of small jon boats, their frog gigs, duckbill poles, and a few coolers of cold refreshments for the hot night ahead.

As usual, somebody thought they knew a shortcut to Otter Creek Lake; it was only a few miles of gravel road. Well, a few missed intersections, and 15 miles of gravel road later, the group stumbled upon Otter Creek Lake; next time, just take the blacktop roads!

As a palette of colors from another magnificent Iowa sunset was fading, the boys put their jon boats

in the water. Snyder and Stump would work the west side of the lake. The other boat would work the east side, and the others would walk the shoreline until they met at the north end of the lake.

As usual, the boys made arrangements with the park ranger to be there after the 10:30 closing time. The ranger granted permission with his usual conditions, they behave themselves and be quiet. On this night, they didn't quite abide with being quiet.

This group of outstanding citizens-to-be, paddled out to survey their respective areas while they waited for darkness. As they quietly paddled they listened for the croaking of the big bullfrogs that inhabited the bath tub lake so typical of county lakes in Iowa. The shorelines were shallow with grass, weeds, brush, and tree stumps. The frogs hid in this cover. The lake gently sloped from the shoreline to a depth of fourteen to twenty feet at the center of the lake. As the night grew on, the shallow shoreline would prove important.

The hot sultry night soaked Snyder and Stump with sweat as they paddled along. It was time for them to let the boat coast and have a refreshment. They popped the tops, took a big chug, and let out a big ahhh....but not too loud; they didn't want to scare the frogs. Their thirst was quenched, momentarily, as Snyder grabbed the flashlight and his gig and in search of frogs they went.

Stump guided the boat in the shallow shoreline water with the duckbill pole. They listened for the croak of the big bullfrogs, and silently slithered through the water toward the sound. Snyder's flashlight would find the croaker, and the bright light would hold the frog in place as long as they were quiet. Stump eased the boat into position and Snyder thrust the gig into the frog. Into the wet gunny sack went the frog with hopes of many more to come.

Their quest for the big croaker frogs continued with success. Now, it was time for Snyder and Stump to change places. However, a pause was required, on this hot and increasingly sultry night, to address their thirst, and maybe, just maybe, more than two tops were popped. Refreshed, they continued to gig frogs with appropriate pauses, on this ever increasing sultry night, in the attempt to quench their thirst. They continued to gig frogs and added to the gunny sack until it was nearing midnight.

After changing places several times, and a refreshment or six, Stump was giggling and Snyder was



polling the boat. Suddenly, a big croak echoed through the darkness. Stump's flashlight scanned the shoreline in search of the big croaker, and the light caught the eyes of a large bullfrog. The largest they had seen that night, and a contender for the largest of the summer.

Stump was very excited and raised his gig in preparation as Snyder silently polled the boat into position. The excited Stump thrust the gig at the BIG frog. In his excitement over the BIG bullfrog, Stump made two errors. He let the light move off the frog's eyes, and he made a noise. A noise; it was more like a war whoop. There was a splash in the water,..... not a good sign.

Stump shined the light back where the frog sat; the frog was gone. Stump's gig was stuck forlornly in the barren old tree stump where the frog had sat. It was a pitiful sight to behold. One syllable words, and combinations thereof, were being uttered by Stump. Snyder was laughing loud enough to scare every frog on the lake.

Stump leaned out over the bow of the boat and grabbed the handle to retrieve his frog gig. He pulled and pulled, but it wouldn't give. He shook it back and forth, still no luck. In his excitement, Stump had thrust it so forcibly that the tines were buried deep in the tree stump. Snyder was laughing hilariously. Well, there was only one thing for Stump to do. He jumped out of the boat into the lake; that was a big splash and heard all over the lake, the campground, and probably the ranger's residence. The laughter and the splash were heard by the other boat across the lake. Nobody wore life jackets. These Jaycees were at the age they still believed they were invincible.

Now, Stump weighed twice as much as Snyder, and the laws of physics were being applied. The bow of the boat rockets upward as Snyder tried to grab on to anything he could to stay in the boat. The bow goes up, and the stern goes down, dumping several gallons of water into the stern of the boat. Snyder is now in uncontrollable laughter and rolling around in the bottom of the wet boat as he tried to find his flashlight. Snyder grabbed his flashlight and shined it on all the commotion in the lake as the guys in the other boat yelled across the lake, "We're coming, is everybody ok?"

Snyder saw Stump, waist deep in the shallow shore line water, wrestling the frog gig with both hands trying to get it loose. Stump continued to communicate with the gig as he wrestled with it in pure frustration. The gig finally came loose and got pitched into the boat. Snyder was laughing so hard he could hardly sit up and Stump was still uttering one syllable words. Every frog in the county is now hiding in silence.

Stump, who had no patience, said nothing as he swung his leg over the side of the small boat and climbed in, almost rolling the boat over, and causing Snyder to fall off his seat again, still laughing so hard he couldn't get up. Stump is now laughing with Snyder, and as the laughter continues, the other boat is getting near and yelling, "Are you guys alright?" Well, so much for being quiet tonight. Snyder and Stump yelled back, "We're ok."

The boys gather round and Snyder commences telling the tale of the events of the night. They all have another great laugh as they quench their thirst on this hot and sultry night. Being late and noisy, the boys decide to take their two full gunny sacks and depart, hoping to still be in the good graces of the park ranger.

On Saturday night, the boys had a frog leg fry with their wives and other Jaycees. The tale of the big frog and the gig stuck in the tree stump was retold amid great laughter, and on this night, this nice young man who joined the Jaycee's a year ago, was anointed with his nickname. The nickname stuck to him harder than the gig in the tree stump. After that night, he only heard his given name on formal occasions. His "friends" made him a memento of a big sturgeon spear stuck in a log and Mrs. Stump made him a mug in her ceramics class. The mug had a picture of an illusive bullfrog and his nickname.

So, "Stump's Stories" became the title for the stories I've written for my grandkids about my adventures in life and posted on my website. I was asked to write this story so a bunch of Jaycee Retired Roosters and their wives could recall some of the best times in our lives and for those who weren't part of the Hudson community in the '70s. Those of us who were part of the Hudson Jaycee's in the '70s feel blessed to have been part of that organization and part of the Hudson Community.

Mrs. Stump now resides in heaven, and Stump has moved away from Hudson, but when he returns to Hudson he still turns his head when old Jaycees or firefighters holler "Hey Stump."



The Ring

Preface:

A miracle is not always front page news, a trending tweet, or a viral video on Facebook. Sometimes it is an ordinary event orchestrated by the Holy Spirit and Angels. This is a story of such a miracle.

The Ring

I arrived in Reisterstown, MD in mid-afternoon during the Fall of 2007. It had been a long journey from Iowa. My daughter was having surgery the next morning. Her recent test results indicated the need for unexpected surgery. She was waiting for me in the parking lot of the apartment complex as

I stepped out of my truck. It had been two years since her mother died and seven years since her sister was killed. Those losses, and the unexpected surgery, placed a great deal of stress on her. We shared a huge hug without noticing a ring had slipped off my daughter's finger.

Karmin was in college when her sister was killed by a drunk driver. She was in her younger brother's wedding two days later and then our family prepared for Kim's funeral. In the days that followed we emptied Kim's apartment. Each member of the family took mementos to help hold Kim close to our hearts. Karmin, Kim's only sister, took the jewelry. One ring became a special bond between Karmin and the memory of Kim. Karmin chose to wear that ring everyday. Unknownst to us, it was now gone.

After I got settled in Karmin's apartment, we began preparing for her surgery the next day. She was helping me with maps and detailed driving instructions. The Reisterstown area was not Iowa. Streets were not laid out square with the world. If you missed a turn, you couldn't just go around the block or the mile.

After supper at a local restaurant, we returned home, and Karmin went to the kitchen to do the dishes that remained in the sink. She reached for her finger to remove the ring. It was gone. The agony was immediate and immense. It was the kind of agony that cuts deep into your heart. She began to search the apartment. She looked in all the usual places; kitchen, bathroom, dresser, nightstand, dining table, end table, desk, recliner, futon, and all over the house. The ring was nowhere to be found. Karmin had a broken heart and the stress of tomorrow's surgery added to the anxiety of the missing ring. She tried to sleep, but little sleep came that night.

There was just enough light from the dawn of the day for me to mentally record landmarks and directions as we drove to the hospital. We found the check-in area and I had to excuse myself. The crab cakes from last night's supper were applying their revenge, and I needed a restroom quickly. I have a sensitivity to egg yolks. I never dreamed crab cakes would contain eggs. As I entered the bathroom, Karmin was on her way to the surgery prep room.

In a few minutes, I was at Karmin's side in the prep room. Everything was on schedule, and she was taken to surgery. I retired to the waiting room and settled into a comfy chair. I pulled out my book and turned to the bookmark to commence the two-hour wait.

The nurse emerged from the double doors. The surgery went well and Karmin was in the recovery room. Another nurse would come and get me when she was awake. The recovery went well. We received outpatient instructions for the next two weeks. They included no driving, no lifting, minimal stair climbing, and returning for a checkup.

We returned home. Slowly, one step at a time, Karmin climbed the flight of stairs to her apartment. She got settled into her bed for some much needed rest. I went out to the parking lot in the apartment complex. The parking space next to my truck, where we had hugged, was empty. I looked for the ring, but I could not find it.

The horseshoe shaped parking lot, and the street, surrounded the playground of the apartment complex. A group of boys were kicking footballs in the direction of my truck. I contemplated moving it to prevent a stray football from putting a dent in the hood of my truck. I decided against moving it and returned to the apartment to check on Karmin.

Two days later redness developed around one of the incisions. The doctor's orders were to contact his office if any redness occurred. The receptionist scheduled an appointment in a half hour. Karmin wanted to ride in her car because entry and exit were easier than my truck. We proceeded to the

doctor's office leaving my truck in the same spot as the day I arrived. The redness was not serious, and we returned home.

We needed some groceries so I took Karmin's car. Full sized extended cab pickup trucks were a rarity in the city. Parking lots and spaces were not friendly to them. I gathered the groceries and returned to the apartment. Karmin's parking space was on the opposite side of the driveway from my truck. I glanced at my truck and didn't notice any dents.

Thunderstorms developed that afternoon with lightning, thunder, and a heavy downpour of rain. An Iowa farm boy would describe it as a gully washer. By the end of the first week Karmin was feeling well enough to carefully navigate the flight of stairs out of the apartment. It was time for laundry. I wanted to take the truck but Karmin preferred her car. We loaded up the laundry and were off to the laundromat. The truck remained in the original parking place.

Karmin's recovery was progressing ahead of schedule. We decided to tour the B&O Railroad Museum. I enjoyed the steam locomotives and old trains on my last visit two years ago. Rest areas were available if Karmin tired of walking. I drove Karmin's car and followed her directions to the museum. My truck stayed in its parking space. We had a great time and Karmin didn't experience any problems.

Karmin continued to improve and decided she wanted to drive to the store. I reiterated the doctor's orders to wait two weeks. She insisted she was up to it, grabbed the keys, and out the door we went. That behavior is genetic. She got it from her mother. Doctor's orders to not do something for a specific time period were just a challenge. Her mother always accomplished the activity before the end of the scheduled time period with no adverse consequences. Karmin is her mother.

A few days later I went out to my truck to get some maps to prepare for the trip back to Iowa. I thought about how my truck had sat in the parking place for almost two weeks. That was unusual. I don't think that truck had ever been motionless for that long. I am always on the go.

I had been thinking about my trip back to Iowa. On the internet I had gathered some information on the Steamtown National Historic Site in Scranton, PA. I love steam locomotives. This historic site has a large collection including a Big Boy locomotive. I was pondering the extra distance back to Iowa as I was telling Karmin about the museum. She told me to go. She knew the route and said it was any easy trip of three to four hours. She told me to go as I might not have time in the future. Her statement was very prophetic. Many times in my life I had passed up points of interest thinking I would do it the next time. Next time never came. I decided to go to Scranton. A year later Karmin moved to Iowa and I've never returned to the Baltimore and Scranton areas.

Karmin's recovery continued to progress ahead of schedule, and soon it was time for me to head out to Scranton. I loaded the truck, and we began our goodbye hugs. The parking space next to my truck was empty. The same space we had shared our arrival hugs. In the midst of our second hug Karmin suddenly let go and shouted "Oh look."

As we hugged, Karmin spotted the lost ring under my truck. She retrieved it with tears of joy in her eyes. Her sister's ring was back on her finger. We just stood there looking at each other. Tears rolled down our cheeks. We hugged again, snuffed our noses, and hugged some more. Since Kim's death both of us had felt Kim's presence around us and in our lives. This was another of those occasions.

I don't believe in coincidences. Things happen for a reason. Events were unfolded for us so that over the course of two weeks my truck never moved from that parking spot; very untypical. The truck had not moved; multiple heavy rains had not washed the ring away; no footballs had dented my truck; I

always yielded to Karmin's wishes to take her car; all of these very untypical. We had been blessed. I will never understand how the relationship of the Holy Spirit and the lives of angels work together, but they had watched out for that ring.

As we prepared for my departure, a hug causes the ring to be found. Our eyes filled with tears. Kim's presence had been felt again. It was a joy that has to be experienced to appreciate; a joy that cannot be described in words. We were thankful.

In Scranton, I was like a kid in a candy shop. I drooled over all the locomotives, the round house, and the repair shop. I touched, then caressed the locomotives, and photographed them. I imagined being a fireman on a Big Boy. Karmin returned to her teaching job. Both of us knew the Holy Spirit and Kim were watching out for us, and we fondly remember the joy of the moment the ring was found.

You Never Know

Preface:

This story was written several years ago as I began the transition from technical writing to story writing. My left brain tech friends will recognize this could have been written in four or five sentences in one paragraph. Story writing takes a few more words.

You Never Know

Winter days can be dismal, grey, cold, and lonely. A birthday forgotten by your family intensifies the gloom and emptiness. But, you never know from where warmth and tenderness will come; nor when it will arrive.

I am a novice writer. I write essays about experiences in my journey of life. I had just finished the revision of two stories of experiences I shared with a woman I had adopted as my sister. The stories were about the events that led me into rehab and saved my life. I was a workaholic and my downward spiral was accelerating. Without Anne's intervention, I would have literally worked myself to death. I am recovering and alive today because of her.

As a novice writer I struggle with the goal of show it, don't tell it. My previous career was as an engineer. I conducted tests, analyzed the data, determined conclusions, and wrote technical reports covering the work. The reports were strictly the facts. The readers were other engineers with detailed knowledge of the subject. Writing was strictly "tell it." Words that "show it" were not permitted.

I had written, and rewritten, the two stories several times. They were my stories, my experiences, and my feelings. They were vivid to me but were they vivid to others? Did the stories draw in the reader? Did they make sense to anyone else? I decided to send the stories to Anne. Anne was with me on both adventures. As a sister, she would give me honest feedback.

I decided to print the stories and send them to her via snail mail. I prefer stories in process not end up as electronic media out there in the internet world. I stuffed the printed stories into a manila envelope. I carried them down the street and around the corner to the post office. I handed them to

the clerk with the request "first-class please." I forked over the postage and on January 2, they were on their way. With the holiday back log of mail I figured it would take them several days to travel the 20 miles to Anne's house.

The next day I was off on some adventure for a few days. When I got back, I went through my email on my desktop computer (no smartphones back then). Most of it was the usual junk all of us get but oh my.....I discovered one from Anne. The story she told me warmed my heart. You never know from where warmth and tenderness will come; nor when it will arrive.

Anne's day at her engineering job had been long and a lot less than fun. January fourth had been one of those cloudy, dark, and gloomy days. The weather was cold and blustery. Anne began the long walk across the parking lot to her car. The north wind bit her cheeks, and her eyes watered.



As she drove home the snow drifted across the highway and the howl of the wind chilled her to the bone. Her old used car chugged along as she turned onto the gravel road. It would be polite to describe that old car as having a lot of character, but it did have heated leather seats that worked. Their warmth was something Anne insisted would be in her next car. She drove past her driveway and stopped at the mail box. The cold frigid air blasted into the car as she rolled down the window to pull the mail from the box. Combined with the junk mail, was a manila envelope from a novice writer.

She backed up and turned into the driveway. She arrived home to an empty yard. The yard was usually filled with cars. None of her four teenage children were home. Their schedules were busy with friends, school, and work. Anne's husband was off on a business trip. He wouldn't be home for a few days. As darkness descended on this cold and dismal wintry evening, she walked into her large but empty house. She put the envelope on the counter, and the loneliness of her empty house gripped her.

Today was her birthday and everyone had forgotten. Not even a card on the kitchen table or a message on the answering machine. She sighed, and a tear came to her eye. I might be prejudice about the girl I adopted as my sister, but she is an angel on earth. She deserved more.

Anne began feeling sorry for herself but that didn't last long. Anne is not a whiner. She built a fire in the wood stove and huddled herself around it. The heat drove the cold chill from her bones. She decided she might as well get cozy and make the best of it. She fixed dinner for one. The tea kettle soon whistled as she prepared her favorite comfort food, hot tea. She found her favorite blanket and grabbed the envelope from the novice writer. She curled up on the couch, soaking up the beams of heat wiggling their way out of the wood stove, and sipped her hot tea.

Anne opened the envelope and found two stories. One story about the day we had spent in Sequoia National Park. The other about the next day we spent at Yosemite National Park. The stories about those two days brought a smile to her face. Those two days changed our lives forever. Anne had gotten me to accept her 13 step rehab program for workaholics. Those two days were the beginning

of a transition. The transition from friends and co-workers to best friends forever, and me adopting her as the sister I never had.

Anne began to read the stories. She began to smile and feel warm. The novice writer was doing ok. The description and dialog of the mountain road caused her to recall the laughter we had shared. As she read she could visualize the mountains and waterfalls. She could again sense the closeness to God each had felt in their own way on those adventures. She read and thoroughly enjoyed each story. She learned things about my feelings and emotions that were unknown to her as I had not shared them with anyone, not even my adopted sister. She shared with me the phrase she recalled when she gazed upon the natural beauty we saw that day; "what an imagination God has.....how could so much variety be conceived and produced on one planet."

Anne said the stories took her back so clearly. They warmed her soul and her spirit. She thought, "What a wonderful birthday present." The recollections of two wonderful days in the mountains filled her with warmth and happiness. So on that blustery and dismal winter day, a manila envelope, mailed at no particular time, arrives on her birthday. A birthday Anne found herself alone and lonely. But, two stories brought smiles to her face and warm memories to her heart; she no longer felt alone or lonely. The stories were a great birthday present, and her e-mail had told me all about it. As I read her e-mail, it had warmed my heart.

You just never know from where warmth and tenderness will come; nor when it will arrive.

IAO

Culture Shock

CULTURE SHOCK

My cousin Marilyn and I lost our spouses eleven months apart. Between those deaths she had lost her father who was a mentor to me. We teamed up to recover from the grief. We talked a lot. We spent some weekends together. We vacationed in the Wisconsin north woods together. She became the sister that I never had and I, the brother she never had. We poured out our hearts and souls to each other. Our bonds strengthened, and we became soul mates of the deepest order. Less than a year after my wife died, my mother died. A year and a half after that my father died and others in my extended family had died. I was struggling with perpetual grief recovery. We decided I would spend the winter of 2008 with her. It would be good for both of us. She could help me spiritually, and I could help her with home maintenance. We thought we knew each other well, but both of us were in for culture shock.

The first culture shock was cooking. Sis was a traditional cook (read that as "old school farm cooking"). Meals were made from scratch and cooked on the stove. A meal must include everything in the food pyramid; whatever that is. Cooking was a methodical process, and time was never a big factor.

Reflecting on my many years as a workaholic and traveling test engineer, food had three requirements. It must be fast, it must be filling, and it should taste good; end of conversation. I cook with a modern age microwave. Whatever is in the bag is ok. I prefer 5 minutes or less in the

microwave. My favorite meal is two packages that take 90 seconds each. Time is money. I ain't got a clue about protein, carbohydrates, and all that stuff. I know meat, bread, and potatoes. A pound of hamburger, a loaf of bread, and a can of Diet Coke is a full meal. Add ketchup, onions, and pickles, and my food pyramid is complete.

I come by the "time is money" philosophy from my dad. When my brother and I grew up on the farm, the noon meal went like this. We left the field to get to the fuel pump at the machine shed by 11:50. Between 11:50 and 12:00 we went to the basement to get worshed (an Iowa word) and then sat down at the dinner table by 12:00. Eating was done by 12:15 when the weather report was on the TV. We adjourned to the living room to watch the weather and farm report on WOI-TV until 12:30. Then, dad gave the daily proverb: "Ain't no rest for the wicked and the righteous don't need it so let's go to work." Out the door we went to fuel the tractors and grease the implements. Then it was off to the field to get the implement in the ground by 1:00. That was the noon hour on Fritz Stratton's farm.

Sis and I looked at each other as we tried to comprehend the others cooking style. Silently in our heads we had the same questions; "What is wrong with you? How can you cook like that?" We talked about it. Our personalities are a lot alike. We are sometimes wrong but seldom in doubt. We are self-sufficient, and self-assured. We are persistent and reluctantly admit we might be a bit stubborn. The likelihood of either of us changing our ways is slim.

Then there was the problem with the stove. Sis has an electric stove and I use a gas stove. Whichever one you have you don't like the other. The kitchen in my fire department had electric stoves so I had some experience at what a miserable cooking device they are.

One day Sis was having a busy day. I said I would cook supper and it was ok with her. My first question was "Where is your cast iron skillet?" The reply was "I don't have one." "WHAT?" I replied, "How can you cook without a cast iron skillet?" "I use waterless cookware" she said and handed me a skillet. She knew my patience, or more correctly the lack there of. I liked gas stoves because when I want high fire I get fire NOW. When I want low fire I get it NOW. So she proceeded to lecture me (her term would be instruct me) to never use high heat on a waterless cookware pan. That lecture had the tone of voice every man knows; the tone that means listen, pay attention, don't argue, or you're in big trouble. I did all three.

So I commenced to cook. One item I was about to prepare was instant sweet potatoes. About the time I was ready to do that, Sis came in the kitchen and said she would fix them. I handed her the box and said, "The instructions are on the side." The next thing I know she sets this pan of soup looking stuff on the stove. I ask "What's that." "The sweet potatoes" Sis replies. "No, I reply, those go in the microwave." Well, I never see stove top instructions on a box and she never sees the microwave instructions. So we have a laugh. Eventually we get the soup boiled down to almost potatoes. What should have taken four minutes takes a half hour.

We had some good chuckles about our different views on cooking. It was culture shock that maybe we didn't know each other as thoroughly as we thought. By the time the winter was over, each would have a better understanding of the other. Neither of us is going to change, but we understand each other.

Laundry was another thing but less traumatic. Sis did my laundry for me and folded the clothes. Clothes hangers were another issue. Now, hangers are correctly used when the hook is toward the left arm of shirts. She put the hook toward the right arm. I have since learned this is a woman thing. How could they be so wrong? Sorting clothes is another issue. What is it with women and colors? Having been married to a Norwegian I was forced to learn to separate whites. After my wife

died I used my own rules to wash (yes, it's an Iowa word) clothes. Whites were separated. Everything else went into two piles, dirty and filthy. It's a lot easier and takes fewer loads, read that as less time. When doing laundry my rule is whoever does the laundry gets to do it their way. So I survived the winter and reversed a few hangers. Don't be expecting either of us to change on this one either.

The next thing we experienced is driving in the city. One day we drove to the place where Sis works part time. As we got in the car I envisioned the route to the four lane expressway, down the expressway, off the exit, and into the office. My travel rule was to always take the highest rated road and I used snow removal criteria for that rating. First choice is the interstate, then multi-lane expressways, then Federal numbered roads, then State numbered roads, then local roads with two digit numbers, then three digit numbers, and so on. The objective is to get on the biggest and fastest road you can, run the speed limit, and get there as fast as you can. Time is money and were burn'n daylight don't ya know. Well it didn't turn out that way.

Sis commenced to take numerous two lane side streets to avoid the traffic. I could see traffic moving swiftly along the express way just a couple of blocks away. How inefficient I'm thinking. I was also surprised because it is well known that when driving on an interstate Sis has a lead foot. We chugged along at 30 mph, between numerous stop signs, as she explained her logic. The trip is less hassle with less traffic and people don't drive so fast. There are more things to see, and besides, it doesn't take that much longer. I listened politely. It was her car, her city, and her route to work, but our adventures with streets would soon get worse.

One day I ventured off on my own to explore the Green Bay metro area. I had a paper road map to guide me. These were the days before I had GPS. I love hardware stores and I found my way to Martin Hardware not far from Sis's house. I walked in, looked around, and began to drool. This was a hardware store's hardware store. There was a lot of stuff in this store. I began to wonder around and look. A person asked if he could help me. I said I was just browsing and struck up a conversation which is unusual for me as I try to keep a low profile and remain a very private person. Well, it turned out he was the owner and he commenced to show me all the new stuff he had in the store. There were items I didn't know I needed. I bought some diamond drills for drilling glass and some other handy dandy items. If I moved to Green Bay, Martin Hardware would be my second home.

I ventured to other places and around Brown County most of that day. I was struggling with street names. This wasn't Phoenix where road names never change in the 100 miles from one side of Maricopa county to the other side the county. In Brown County, the road name changes every quarter mile. When I got back to Sis's house I started asking her questions about street names and routes I had taken. The first issue was I refer to roads by their number, and she refers to roads by their name. I asked about a north-south road I was on and she told me I was on an east-west road. By the tone of our voices, we both knew an argument was coming. We staked out our position, and both of us dug in our heels. We went back and forth on that issue and it became obvious we weren't on the same page, heck, we weren't even in the same book. Now this wasn't totally unexpected because Sis had tried to navigate for me on a trip or two we had taken together. It was obvious that an engineer and a nurse had different concepts of what entails navigation and giving directions.

In frustration, I got out the map and laid it out on the kitchen table. I pointed to the road and said, "See here, it goes north-south." She says, "No it don't; it goes east-west when it crosses the river." "What river?" I ask. Sis came over to look at the map and placed her finger on the river. Well, she was talking about downtown Green Bay (Main Street / 141) and I was talking about the eastern suburb area (Hwy 141/Main Street). We were both right, but we were in different parts of the county on a road that didn't change name / numbers and the road went in multiple directions. So

the conclusion was that asking each other for driving directions was going to be an adventure unto itself. However, there would be more culture shock.

On a Friday afternoon we were traveling to the "Holy Land" area south of Green Bay. It is called the "Holy Land" because most towns have a St. something name with a church on a hill and a bar or restaurant that serves fantastic fish on Friday night. Sis wasn't sure of the exact route so we went while it was still daylight so she could use land marks to navigate. She is pretty good at navigating by land marks. However, her memory of some landmarks was a little fuzzy because she had only been on this route once. I dug out my paper road map of Wisconsin. Sis looks out the window; she looks at the map; she looks out the window; she asks what direction we are going; she starts turning the map upside down. What the heck is going on. Well, it seems that she doesn't read a map like "normal" people. North is not up. She has to have the map rotated so it points in the same direction my truck is going. If you are going south, then the south end of the map must be pointing toward the front of the truck. Well that was new to me, but she was the navigator and I was totally lost; well that's not true, according to her dad, I wasn't lost, I just didn't know where I was at. It's amazing what your uncle can teach you. I asked her to just give me a general bearing and I would work it out. She didn't understand navigating by a bearing. We had a good laugh about how a nurse navigates, and an engineer navigates. We drove directly to the restaurant and enjoyed a fantastic evening of Friday night fish with the trimmings (Wisconsin brandy old fashioned sweet). We followed the bread crumbs and had a great trip back home. So navigating roads became another culture shock that we had conquered. Our adventure to the "Holy Land" brought us to an even greater understanding and appreciation for each other.

Each others patience was a mild culture shock for us. We knew Sis had more patience than I do. In fact most other people have more patience than I do. I spent my life as an engineer and a firefighter. Decisions had to be made and sometimes made in a few ticks of the clock. I am action oriented. I want action, and I want it now. Sis had a career as a nurse. She had lots of patience. Her approach was wait and see what happens; let the medicine work for a while. We understood that about each other. However, we didn't fully understand the depth of how each of us approached our own patience. For me, having a lot of patience meant waiting until tomorrow. For Sis, having a lot a patience meant waiting until next year. I was thinking about buying a house in the Green Bay area. I couldn't find what I wanted. I was frustrated. In her most sisterly voice, my Sis told me to have patience and I didn't need to make that decision right now. Because of the tone of her voice, and that she is my sis, I listened. That was the most important advice I've ever been given. If there was culture shock, it was because I listened and took her advice.

I began this story in 2011 and I'm finishing it in 2016. Sis and I have both mellowed with time, and we surprise ourselves at how we sometimes embrace the others characteristics. I moved to Missouri in 2010 and in 2011 I took a back road home from town to avoid the traffic and congestion. I'm driving down the road, and I broke out laughing. I think I just became my sister, driving the local back roads to get from here to there. I would admit to cooking more on a stove and Sis to doing more microwave. She still cooks on the stove according to the food pyramid. Although once considered impossible I pick more microwave meals that include vegetables. I have learned about carbs, proteins, and fats. Even more scary, she sometimes admits to thinking like me, the engineer/firefighter, and I like her, the nurse/nutritionist. Our bonds have strengthened as we have mellowed. Sometimes we have ESP about each other. Our souls remain linked as we continue this journey of earthly life, and it is a great adventure.



If our culture shock gets too great we remember the wisdom of her father, my uncle Art, and my mentor.



The Purse

Preface:

The Holy Spirit brings people into your life for a reason, and this is one of those stories. A story about a chance encounter of two strangers; one departing without knowing what happened; and one departing with a lifestyle change; and neither knowing the name of the other.

The Purse

Most men, if they've been married more than 30 minutes, know they are in a training program. Training a husband is just part of a woman's nature. Some women are exceptionally talented. They can train a man they don't know, and he won't realize it until the training is over. She was that type of woman.

I had been on a business trip for three months. The weeks of tractor testing in hot and dusty Arizona had been long and grueling. I was exhausted. I looked forward to trading the one hundred plus temperatures of Arizona for the cooler eighty-degree days of Iowa.

I had finished a long hot day of work with great satisfaction. Long hours and detailed planning allowed me to accomplish all the goals of the test plan. Still dusty and dirty I made my way to a hotel near the Phoenix airport. After a long hot shower, I crawled into bed about eleven. I had the early flight out of Phoenix. I wasn't looking forward to the 4 AM wake up call.

The obnoxious ring of the push button phone on the night stand jarred me awake. It couldn't be 4 AM but a look at the digital clock with a four and two zeros verified it was. I got dressed, made myself presentable, and called for a luggage cart. The bellhop loaded two suit cases weighing 75 pounds each, the limit back then, my computer bag, and my carry-on bag. Blurry eyed I made my way to the lobby. The next shuttle would leave in 25 minutes so I worked to stay awake.

During the shuttle ride to the airport terminal I visualized getting off the plane in Iowa and into the arms of my wife. At the ticket counter, I checked in but not without listening to the grumbling about my 75 pound bags. My safety shoes with metatarsal shields and steel toes were heavy. Ten days of heavy-duty Carr Hart work clothes added more weight. As usual, a couple of broken tractor parts in need of further analysis were packed in the bags.

By now I was hungry and looked for a food stand that had bagels. My sensitivities to various foods limited my airport breakfast menu to bagels. Food service was not going to be provided on the flight. I inhaled a couple of bagels and a diet coke. I hoped the flight was on time so I could grab a burger in St. Louis. After clearing security, an easy exercise in the '90s, I hiked to the end of the concourse. I found a chair and waited for the boarding call. I would lose two hours on the flight to St. Louis. Arizona did not observe daylight savings time. With temperatures over 100 degrees, they didn't need more hours of afternoon play time. It would be noon and dinner time when I got to St. Louis.

The boarding call came. I went down the ramp, and I settled into my window seat. As always, I immediately turned the overhead vent to full blast. Cold air crossed my nostrils. Flowing cool air allowed me to manage my motion sickness without Dramamine. A good flight is uneventful, and this was such a flight. I was glad to land in St. Louis. It was close to noon, time for dinner, and my stomach knew it. We were on the ground, but our arriving gate was not available. We waited and waited on the tarmac before proceeding to a gate. My thoughts of a burger were fast evaporating.

St. Louis was not my favorite airport. Typically it was stinky and dirty. Today would be no different. Murphy's Law was intact, and my arriving gate was at the end of the concourse. I began the long hike to the commuter terminal. I packed my twenty-pound computer bag, and my twenty-pound carry on bag toward the main terminal. At the main terminal I exited the secure area and checked my watch. There was no time for a burger, but home was an hour and a half away. I moved across the terminal to the security screening area for the commuter terminal. I was breathing and walking, so I cleared security without a hitch.

Packing my heavy bags I started the long hike down the corridor to the commuter terminal. About halfway there I caught a whiff of jet engine exhaust. A pungent odor I preferred not to inhale prior to a flight. The St. Louis commuter terminal was notorious for being filled with the stench of jet engine exhaust. The exit door for plane boarding was usually open for two reasons. Crews were constantly in and out of the door and it was a futile attempt at ventilation. The choices were jet engine exhaust or pungent body odor from the crowded terminal. What is it they say about the lesser of two evils?

I settled into a chair with my back to the wall, my preferred location for safety. I expected the

boarding call at any minute. I was anxious to get home. I had visions of my wife's waiting arms. Then the dreaded announcement came. My flight had been delayed because the inbound crew was behind schedule. As usual, no other details were provided but we were asked to stay in the waiting area. Food service was not available in the commuter terminal. It was a long hike back to the main terminal. I was starting to feel hungry. The jet engine exhaust fumes went straight to my stomach, and I got hungrier and hungrier. I couldn't chance a trip to the main terminal and missing my flight. I was stuck in the waiting area with no food and nothing to drink.

I gazed around the room. Over the years, I had learned to people watch to help pass the time. Airports provide an enormous variety of people to be observed. As I scanned the room, I spotted her. She was about 30 feet across the room in a row of seats perpendicular to mine. She was seated in the end seat and facing to my left. Her medium sized purse was seated on the floor next to her. Her laptop computer bag was in the seat on her right. She was slender, tall, maybe six foot, and was an attractive woman.

The computer and her demeanor caused me to guess she was a successful and self-confident business woman. She was well dressed in a brown pinstriped pants suit with a white blouse. The pumps she wore on her long slender feet complemented her pants suit. I guessed the clothes came from an upscale department store. Her brunette hair was straight and had a lot of body. It dropped just to the shoulder and curled in. This woman could have been the poster girl for the dressed-for-success business woman. I watched her, but she did not notice me. The gate agent announced the delay would be extended but to please not leave the gate area. My stomach was past being hungry. It was starting to make noises. It was asking for food. I was day dreaming and thinking of food. I am good at that. I like to eat. If I was lucky, the commuter flight might have peanuts and a coke. The more I thought about food; the hungrier I got. I was in a downward spiral. I scanned back to her, and then it happened.

She reached down for her purse, brought it her lap, and pulled the two sides apart to open it; not



unusual for a woman. But what happened next was the lesson. She peered into the purse and extracted a cherry tootsie pop; my absolute favorite flavor. She unwrapped it and put it in her mouth. My stomach commenced to talk in stereo. I'm thinking, "darn those women and their purses, they have all the breaks." Men just have pockets. Mine are full of specific stuff for doing test work. There is no room for tootsie pops.

I watched her enjoy the tootsie pop. I'm getting envious. I tried not to be too obvious, and she seemed unaware that she was being watched. The more I watched the more I salivated. My drool probably dripped on my shirt. I contemplated asking her if she had more tootsie pops in her purse.

I'm a long time introvert and I couldn't bring myself to do it.

As she finished the cherry tootsie pop my stomach goes into convulsions. As she puts the tootsie pop stick in the disposal bin her flight was called. She picks up her purse and computer bag and gracefully walked to the entrance of the boarding tunnel. As I watched her disappear I'm sitting there thinking, "you idiot, you're always in such a hurry and only think about test data. You could put tootsie pops in your computer case for emergencies like this." I resolved to make a change in my life. I would keep tootsie pops in my computer case. They would provide moisture and food value during extended stays in stinky airport terminals. Maybe I could make other people drool.

Eventually my flight was called. I got home and into the arms of my wife. I was tired, hungry, and drooling for a cherry tootsie pop. In a stinky commuter terminal in St. Louis this woman trained a man she didn't know. A man who was unaware he was being trained until it was over and his life would be changed forever. She was a talented woman.

It's been a couple of decades since that day and I'm now retired. Today, you will find tootsie pops in the armrest of my pickup truck. You never can tell when a little moisture and nourishment might be needed. I still wonder if she had more tootsie pops in that purse.

The Handshake

Preface:

Everyone has moments in their lives that remain vivid in their memory. This story is one of my moments. You might need kleenex; I still do.

The Hand Shake

In August of 2004 Maxine and I went to Chicago to attend a wedding. We decided to take a few days for vacation and continue DePere, WI to see my cousin Marilyn. Her husband had passed away in July and all of us needed to share hugs again. Marilyn had invited me to attend a preseason Packer's game. I was looking forward to the thrill of seeing a game at Lambeau Field.

A few years earlier Marilyn decided to retire from her job as an occupational health nurse. She then took her parents into her home and spent her time caring for them. Her father was suffering from dementia. Her mother was still self-sufficient but unable to expend the energy to care for a dementia patient.

Marilyn's dad, Art, was my favorite uncle. He had been a mentor and guide. As I grew up, he was the key figure in the development of my spiritual life. He always put people first, ahead of work. He was a member of many committees and organizations. He was always doing something to help make his corner of the world a better place. I aspired to be like Uncle Art.

A few years earlier, before the dementia became severe, I stopped at Uncle Art's farm for a short visit on the way home from a business trip to Chicago. He struggled with short-term memory, but he could recall growing up in Story County Iowa. I knew bits and pieces of those times from stories my dad had told. I asked Uncle Art questions about those days. He told me several stories. I learned

stories about my dad that I had never heard. That visit was the last time we would be able to have story telling session.

Whenever I walked into Marilyn's house, Uncle Art would look up and smile at me. Something he didn't always do when people entered a room. Although he could no longer communicate, I thought he recognized me. I was his first nephew. He spoiled me and we always had a close relationship.

My wife Maxine was a nurse and volunteered to stay with Uncle Art and Aunt Lois while Marilyn and I went to the Packer's game. We went with another couple and had a great time. There is no place like the hallowed tundra of Lambeau Field and the excitement of a football game. The Packer's lost to Seattle 3 to 21. But it was just a pre-season game. The Pack would be back.

Every morning Uncle Art was helped on a bus and was taken to an adult center for dementia patients. He shuffled along as he went to the bus, never indicating he recognized any of us. The morning we were leaving to return home I was sitting in the kitchen; Marilyn's favorite room in a home. Marilyn was guiding Uncle Art through the house and toward the bus. As he came through the kitchen, we both looked at each other and smiled. Then Uncle Art stopped and turned toward me. He stuck out his hand for a handshake. I stood up, walked across the kitchen, and shook his hand. That was the last time I would see Uncle Art alive. He passed away in November.

I will always believe that in spite of his dementia, Uncle Art knew I was leaving and he knew we would not see each other again. I will always believe it was the Holy Spirit at work. I shall always remember the smile and the handshake of that day.



The Bond Strengthens

Preface:

This story, written in 2006, is about the journey of two very independent people working to recover

after the death of their spouses. Both strongly believed you must get back up after you get knocked down but this time they couldn't do it by themselves.

The Bond Strengthens

The 21st Century had been tough on cousin's Gary and Marilynn. Gary and Maxine's daughter Kim was killed in June of 2000 by a drunk driver. In July of 2004, Marilynn's husband Phil had taken his life. In November 2004, Marilynn's dad, Gary's favorite uncle, had died from complications of dementia. In the winter of 2004-2005 Gary's wife Maxine had lost two cousins to cancer. In February 2005 Maxine's younger brother Virgil died from lung cancer. In June of 2005, Gary's wife Maxine died from lung cancer. In early December 2005, the wife of Maxine's older brother Chuck died of cancer. The day after Christmas 2005, Ray, a cousin of Gary and Marilynn, lost his wife to cancer. In March of 2006, Gary's mother died from heart problems and complications of old age. Gary and Marilynn were worn out from perpetual grieving.

In a period of 11 months, Marilynn and Gary lost their spouses. In a few more months, Ray lost his spouse. In 18 months, the three eldest cousins had all lost their spouses.

Marilynn and Gary had formed a strong bond in the 1980s. They were the eldest male and female of the cousins. Part of that bonding was the first born syndrome. All of the other cousins looked to them for leadership and answers to life's questions. Another part of bonding was that they shared a great deal of the Stratton "genes": they were farm kids; you can't stop to rest until all the work is done; if you think all the work is done you must have forgotten something; always helping others but forgetting to take care of yourself; a passion for family history; an inability to say no to anyone who needs help; the knowledge that they had become their fathers; that in times of indecision of a group they step forward and make the decisions; admitted or not they like to be in control; the instinct that they could always figure a way out of a problem; and the instinct that individually they could handle anything by themselves.

Both of them were devastated by the sudden loss of their spouses. After Phil died, Gary gave Marilynn a journal with a personal letter in it. After Kim's death, a close friend had given Gary a journal with a personal message in it. That gift helped him cope with the loss of his daughter. He passed on that gift to Marilynn. After Maxine died, Marilynn did the same for Gary. The journey of the journal gift had come full circle in a short time.

With the loss of their spouses, both of them encountered something they could not handle individually or even together. The grief was just too great. This was a perplexing situation for both of them. Unknown to each other, both of them decided to seek professional counseling. Shortly, both made it known they had sought counseling and it was helpful; for they knew their cousins were watching to see if the two leaders they looked up to would recover.

After Phil's death, Gary shared with Marilynn what he had learned from Kim's death and about grieving. He tried to be the brother that Marilynn didn't have. He gave her a shoulder to lean on and cry on.

At the funeral for Marilynn's dad, Gary and Marilynn sat together to hold each other up. Both were grieving a person very important to both of them. In the days before and after Art's funeral, Gary and Marilynn came to understand how much they needed each other.

After Maxine's funeral, Marilynn stayed with Gary for a week. She had given Gary a journal with her personal note. She became the sister that Gary didn't have. She shared her knowledge about grief after the loss of a spouse. She gave him a shoulder to lean on and cry on.

The relationship would strengthen and sustain them as they grieved and worked to find their individual new path in this ongoing journey of life.

They could talk with each other about feelings and things they could talk with no one else about. They could cry and sob on each others shoulder and not feel guilty or ashamed. They knew, as only they could know, how much it hurt, deep down hurt.

They shared their Lutheran faith, the faith their grandmother, Grum, who was widowed at a young age, had taught them. The faith that life goes on and you can, and must, be strong. They talked about God still having plans for them. There were things yet to be done on their journey of life. They didn't know the details, but they were confident the Holy Spirit would guide them, individually, and together.

Gary and Maxine had vacationed, fished, relaxed, ate out, and sometimes made important life changing decisions at the Red School Resort in Birchwood, WI. The fall colors of late September and early October provided a picturesque setting for them to relax.

Gary decided he wanted to continue to go to Birchwood. It soothed his soul. But in the fall of 2005 he didn't want to go alone. Without Maxine, it would be too hard to be alone. Now, it was a toss up whether he or Marilynn was the biggest workaholic. He was doubtful he could get Marilynn to go. However, she agreed the first time he asked. Talk about the work of the Holy Spirit!

Together they spent a week in Birchwood. The cabin had Lazy Boy recliners in front of the picture



windows looking out on the lake. The red, orange, gold, and brown leaves were in their magnificent fall color. The white bark of the birch trees stood out brilliantly in the woods. From the boat in the middle of the lake they watched bald eagles glide across the sky in the pink and purple sunsets. They listened to the calls of the Loons. They watched the brilliant orange of the harvest moon rise over the lake and reflect on the glassy smooth water. They fished, they relaxed, they talked, they cried, they bonded deeply. They became brother and sister forever.

Their cousin bond was formed as children. He living in central Iowa and she in southeast Wisconsin. The bond became thin after high school. Both had set out on their generations mission to "do your own thing." Like most of their generation, that mission left them wanting. They had lost contact with one another. There was an emptiness in their lives

The original cousin bond was reformed in the 1980s when their paths crossed in southwest Wisconsin. The Holy Spirit had reconnected them. Neither had any idea that reconnection was preparing them for future events. After the death of their spouses, and a week in Birchwood, that bond would become a brother-sister bond.

They continued to use that bond to strengthen, sustain, and love each other as they find their new paths on the journey of life. They know the Holy Spirit is at work every day in their lives. Sometimes they are not sure where their individual paths are leading them, but they know the Holy Spirit is guiding them. They know that regardless of where their individual paths lead them, they will always have a brother-sister relationship.

They also know, as with their marriages, one of their souls will return to God before the other. When that happens, the remaining one will cry, sob, and grieve again. The remaining one will also be filled with joy that the other has begun the journey in the next life. The one that remains on earth will give thanks for the times the two of them were able to share the joys and the heartbreaks of the earthly life. They will also look forward to the day their bond will again be renewed in the next life.

With a bond strengthened from life's experiences, the two cousins continue on life's journey as brother and sister.



The Goose Glide

Preface:

Watching wildlife helps us understand how we should behave. Take the time to watch the geese and learn from them.

The Goose Glide

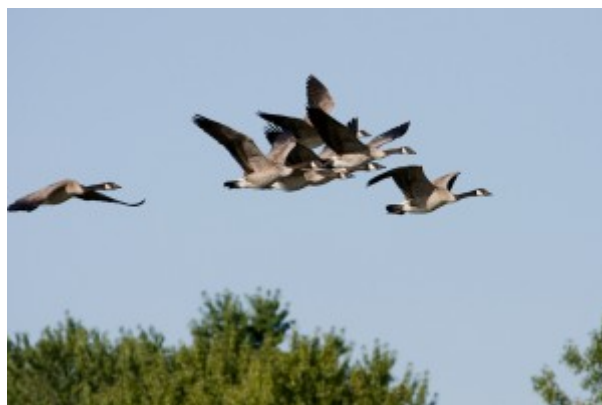
The sun was bright in the mile high blue sky. Its rays warmed my back as I walked. The wind was gentle and the morning was fresh. I inhaled the clean crisp smell of fall air. The day had the makings of a perfect fall day.

I was making my second lap walking the short trail at Prairie Lakes. The walk was yet another attempt to get in the habit of walking. My doctor told me I needed to walk. Walking would be gentle on my knees and help my overall health. Walking for exercise or enjoyment is a great

challenge for me. In my youth I was a farm kid. I spent a good deal of my summers walking bean fields. We walked and we pulled weeds; we walked and we pulled weeds; we walked and we pulled weeds. It was an endless job, especially the first time through the fields sometime in June. My father, my brother and I each took two rows. My father was insistent we pull every weed. The second time through we would take four rows as the hot July sun baked us. The third time through we would take six rows as the dog days of August passed slowly. Our biggest dread was the eighty acre fields that were a quarter mile wide and a half mile long. We walked the half mile length all day and it seemed we made little progress toward the opposite side of the field. When I left the farm for the city, I did not miss the endless days of walking. Walking for exercise or enjoyment and not seeing endless rows of soybeans is a challenge. Anyway, I digress from the goose glide.

On my second lap, with visions of endless soybean rows still haunting me, I passed a large coarse weed among the prairie grass. By now I was walking slow, thinking, and reflecting. The tall mature coarse weed gave me an idea for a story. I'm a novice writer and some of my story ideas just come out of the clear blue. Maybe walking has a plus side? I recalled the weed wars my brother and I had against each other. As I walked I mentally started putting that story together in my head.

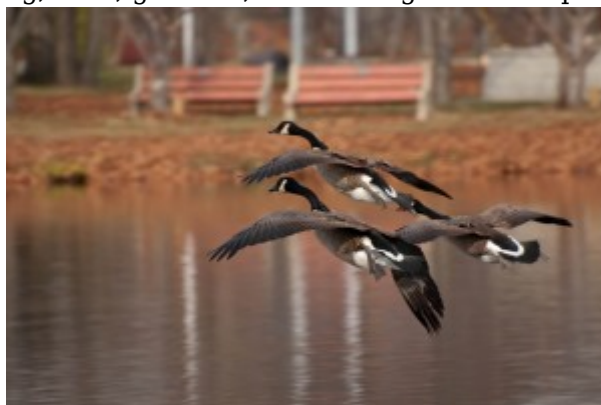
Someday I will write that story but as I turned the corner, out of the clear blue sky came another story. Wow, two in the same day. This walking could make a lot of work for me. A flock of low flying geese just popped over the trees in the middle of the walking loop. They were flapping wings and honking. Their V formation changed as each goose rotated in and out of formation. The flock



was about the hard work of preparing for fall migration.

I paused and watched. My cousin Jolene, an avid walker, has encouraged me to slow down and enjoy the beauty of the obvious and ordinary. The geese continued their flight with constant wing flapping and noisy honking. They made a couple of loops around the Prairie Lake Park. As the geese came over the trees they broke formation and formed a single line. The lead goose spread his big wings banked to the left. The flock became silent.

The goose began a long, slow, graceful, and silent glide to the pond. Oh, the beauty of a graceful



gliding goose. As he neared the water his webbed feet lowered for a graceful landing. Each goose in turn followed. I watched a line of geese with their wings extended, all descending on the same glide path in silent harmony with the world.

The lead goose selected the sheltered end of the pond for the landing area. Water at the landing area was glass smooth and reflected the trees and cattails around the pond. The area was out of the wind with quiet water, great peace, and serenity. After landing, the geese gathered in pairs and small groups. They were still silent. The noise of flapping wings and honking voices was gone. This little corner of the world was silent and the geese rested in quiet serenity.



The beauty and serenity of the obvious and ordinary moment made me wonder if we should be more like the geese. Often we work hard but often the clock becomes our master. We plan our work time to the moment. We plan our vacations in great detail. Here at this time, there at that time, and no time for that. No time to relax, we hurry here, hurry there, making a big splash as we rush about like an out of control balloon rocketing about a birthday party.

I began to think. When we rest, shouldn't we seek out quiet and serenity instead of just doing a quick inhale for a second wind? Shouldn't we pause, even in the middle of the day? Shouldn't we be a leader and have our partners, family, and friends follow us? Follow us as we spread our wings and gently, silently, glide into a quiet and serene area to relax.

At this point in my life I usually have more questions than I have answers. So I pondered these questions as I continued my walk. The haunting of endless soybean rows soon vanished. My thoughts turned to new stories to write and visions of the graceful and quiet goose glide. Oh, the joys of being a writer.