LONG ISLAND
OPINION

'I Want To Be Alone' —Er, Not Really

By MARCIA BYALICK

It had been one of "those days" — the ones when your car gets a flat tire and the washing machine overflows, when you arrive five minutes too late for the funeral or a week early for a doctor's appointment. "Those days" occur regularly in all our lives.

A recent Thursday was the latest in mine. As I set the table for dinner, the phone and the doorbell rang simultaneously. The paper boy waited for his money, as I counted out his change while listening to my friend tell me awful news about her mother's health. Just then my daughter came running with the thickest splinter I had ever seen imbedded in her finger. As I heated the straight pin over the burner, she asked through her tears, "Ma, wasn't this the day you were supposed to pick up Aunt Karen at the gas station at 5:30?"

"Leave me alone, world," I screamed silently. "You're suffocating me." Like beautiful Greta Garbo, [illegible] Henry Thoreau, eccentric Howard Hughes, I want to be alone!

Even as the words are formed in my mind, I know I don't really mean them. Having grown up as a woman in the time when leaving home meant merely switching allegiance, not independence, I have never known solitude as a companion. "Splendid isolation" was something I regarded as darkly romantic, emotionally courageous and intellectually high-minded.

But however much I might envy the quiet that being alone would provide, the notion of spending any length of time with just me as company is not appealing. Apart from the turmoil, detached from the madding crowd, I envision being alone to be lonely. I guess I don't have what it takes to positively absorb, dream and create inner peace in seclusion.

Whenever I retreat into my thoughts, I find myself a hard person to spend time with. Instead of putting some order into the tangled priorities of my life, I relive petty mistakes and embarrassments. Peace might temporarily empty my mind; too much time alone gives my dark thoughts room to break through.

Ideally, solitude provides the perspective to focus on life as a whole. Removed from the nitty-gritty, the trivial wrinkle-producing nonsense that makes up my days, I should, like the astronauts looking down on earth, see what's important more clearly. From this removed vantage point, anxieties, judgments and disappointments should lose their power to hurt.

Instead, I dwell on the big dark stuff — illness, accidents, unproductiveness and death. I think I wind up spending my time alone concentrating on what's negative because I enjoy life's goodies more when sharing them. Any extended time without laughing, without energy-generating conversation, without a loved one's warm cuddle might just as well be spent on depressing thoughts.

The few times I've spent some time by myself recently, I've spent mulling the why and what-if's of my life. These questions with no answers only serve to replace the everyday stress I'm escaping with a more chronic unconscious tension. What if my family becomes the one in four to know cancer firsthand? What if I were born 10 years later — whatever would I have been when I grew up? Why, if losing 10 pounds would make me as happy as I think, have I failed to so do — after 15 years of complaining?

Why is the world making a woman's life so difficult by increasing her choices but not decreasing her responsibilities? Why is so little of my time alone spent comfortably? And finally, if I can't stand solitude, isn't that proof that I am a shallow, lazy coward? My God, to think I inflict this person on all those I love!

Leaving my mind free to wander works beautifully for the first few hours. I do need the space to move back a little, but just a few feet. I might want to be out of the limelight, but I need to stay close enough to be part of the audience. It is when I am by myself long enough to call alone solitude that the space itself becomes alarming. All of a sudden the sun gives just light and there's a chill in the air. "Quiet" feels like "desolate"; "separate" feels like "abandon."

For years, I thought my lack of desire to be alone meant I was neurotic and intellectually inferior. After all, the only people I admired who spent parts of their lives totally alone were high-thinkers. After being in awe of their superior intellectual facility, I have come to see their other side.

People who chose a lot of reclusive time tend to be responsible for and to no one other themselves. Time away from life's routine is so rare for most of us that to choose to spend it without the company of a friend or loved one says a lot about a person's ability to share. For however beneficial solitude might be for the imagination, it does nothing to develop the character. No matter how skillfully solitude can hone the mind, the heart's education lies in society's roar.

As a rule, mothers make lousy loners. While there is probably no group that says it craves time alone more, there is no doubt that mothers would be in desperate straits with too much time away from nurturing. The immediacy of the ordinary in a child's world is what is precious to its mother. There are "firsts" at every stage of development that appear and are gone in a flash. Children need mothers to support what's new and to endlessly reinforce what's been learned. Thoreau might find it tedious, and at times it's that and more, but listening and molding, hearing and instructing must remain an intense daily experience for it to work.

As I write this, I'm alone. My 11-year-old is watching MTV in the den and my 14-year-old is polishing her nails chartreuse. My husband's in the shower. Each of us is alone. As Tennesee Williams said, "We're all of us sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skins for life."

So I guess I'll hang on amid phone calls and doorbells, bloody noses and traffic jams, stolen wallets and unpaid bills — bravely facing the music, heroic for staying, not running away. Perhaps in a few years' time I'll even decide that spending a few days alone would be more desirable than spending a few days with my husband. Perhaps a few days by myself would be more beneficial than our annual four-day trek upstate with friends. Perhaps, but I doubt it. ■

Marcia Byalick lives in Searingtown.

Never Mind The Wallflowers

By ELIZABETH WIX

WHEN I moved to Long Island six years ago, intending to make it my home, there was nothing I missed so much as the gardens of my childhood in England — those verdant green jewels laid out to perfection by stalwart country matrons or lusty clerks whose lawn stripes matched the regularity of their bookkeeping.

There are gardens everywhere, in minute backyards more reminiscent of cemetery plots, public gardens, private gardens that you have to pay to get into, and ones that wave cheerfully to you as you sweep past in grimy commuter trains. True, there are wonderful gardens here, botanical triumphs, but nothing, I think, to match the sheer number and variety of English ones.

Naïvely, I thought it would be easy to reproduce exactly what I missed. In one season I would transform my humble and barren plot into something of which Gertrude Jekyll herself would have been proud. I would have undulating swathes of billowing color, my palette drawn from every hue in the rainbow. I would have lupins, of course, and delphiniums whose eight-foot spikes would tower above me, and lavender hedges swarming with bees. I would recline in my deck chair and admire my handiwork.

In theory, I suppose, all this is possible. But I had not reckoned with everything in America being more so: much hotter and much colder; much wetter and much drier; no dependable gentle showers and softly kissing sun here. On cold February evenings I would get out my note-book and make elaborate diagrams: phlox here, stocks there, and wallflowers by the barn, dozens of them scenting the May air. My garden was a triumph of imagination over reality.

The first thing I had to revise was my idea of what a lawn should be (grayishly-green velvet carpet a regulation half-inch high, mown in alternating stripes and dotted with charming little daisies whose delicately blushing tips announce the necessity of their imminent beheading). The green stuff sprouting in my backyard grows lushly enough, to be sure, except it was full of wild onion and crabgrass creeping meanly sideways. It wasn't a lawn at all, but a tamed meadow with not a daisy to be found. If I mowed it too short, the sun burned it up. No alternating stripes for me!

I wanted a perennial garden, one that would grow more lovely each year. Not for me the post-Easter trip to the garden center to get in my year's supply of marigolds and petunias to plunk in front of the foundation planting. I put in my lupins and delphiniums and they flowered once, a little reluctantly, but they did not come back. My lavender bushes were runty and stunted. I could not find a single wallflower and had to make do with forget-me-nots.

For years I resisted the charms of impatiens, which now cheer and brighten the shadier areas of my patch. Who on earth wanted things in the *shade* anyway? I had not counted on temperatures in the 90's.

I was a bit sniffy about evergreens, too; not realizing that for so much of the year they are all that give the garden its shape and substance. Here everything dies back so much more resolutely and entirely than in England. I had not had the opportunity to study the frosty and protracted beauty of yew trees under snow (not for weeks at a time anyway).

I had never met a dogwood tree or pachysandra. The idea of groundcover was quite foreign to me. What else would one cover the ground with if not grass?

It dawned on me slowly, and through many seasons, that gardening, like politics, is the art of the possible. If I could not get what I wanted to thrive, I would plant those things that would. I chose plants that are either native to Long Island or show signs of liking it here. If I could not follow the letter of the law, at least I would follow it in spirit. I was humbled, in fact.

And so now I have my "English" garden with billowing masses of color in my serpentine herbaceous border. It does attract bees, but instead of delphiniums and lupins and wall-flowers, I have coryopsis and day lilies, black-eyed susans and phlox, snapdragons and evening primrose, all growing in wild profusion.

It may fool you; it may look like an English garden. But it is not. Like my children, it is a hybrid growth, looking both to the past and the future, and it gets more American every year. ■

Elizabeth Wix lives in Huntington.

Joanna Roy

Euphemism Strikes Again

By EDITH FELBER

THE ad was dazzling. The special plant that the nursery's copy billed as the "Peace Lily" was described in such wondrous terms that my hands shook with a surge of acquisitiveness even as I held the newspaper.

Until I saw the tiny parentheses with the little notation of its true, common, familiar, Latin name. Then it was clear that the amazing plant was no more than the usual little green bit of boredom that's been sold, usually crammed into ceramic bunnies, at five-and-dime stores forever — and a few days before that. Euphemism had struck again, and again I'd tumbled for it.

You would think I'd be immune; you'd think we all would be by now. Haven't we slid into dozens of plastic banquettes and picked up innumerable menus describing hamburgers dripping with the most delicious adjectives known to man, with side dishes heaped with piping-hot nouns and luscious, garden-fresh-picked euphemisms? And as we've chewed our gristly gray burgers and greasy fries, we've never once complained to the management about the vast continent dividing truth from gorgeous menu imagery.

And haven't we all read real-estate ads and seed catalogues and lived through election years? We ought by now to have grown immune to all the noxious exaggerations and euphemisms that surround us from birth. We ought to have, but we aren't, because like any other progressive disease it gets worse every year.

It began, perhaps, the year that the sanitation engineers killed all the garbage men and took over their jobs. It wasn't long before the insane became disturbed, and the lewd were only "acting out," and the depraved became kinky. That way, nobody's feelings were hurt; no one felt inferior.

My mother would be thrilled to see that all the perverts she warned me about in my youth are gone now. Indeed, they must be extinct since I haven't heard of one for years, have you? But the world's no better, safer or more peaceful without them.

If a two-bit plant can be worth $10 with its new name, we can all begin to name our troubles away. Don't you like your job? Change it, without moving a muscle except in your jaw. Everyone else has. Where have all the janitors gone? Gone to custodians everywhere. What's a clerk, mommy? A Guy/Gal Friday now.

Never underestimate the power in a name. Revolutions have been fought over titles. Ask any "chairperson." What's in a name is all our hope and belief. We judge books by their covers, would probably never elect a President named Percival.

It's not just the remarkable new horticultural discovery the "Peace Lily," which will sit in its plastic pot and slowly grow brown around the edges just as it always has, no matter what you call it, no matter how much you paid for the privilege of watching it die in your central heating. Nor is it even the new food product my supermarket recently called my attention to in a flier, a delicacy they called Krab Flakes, which very close reading discovered to be a "seafood flavored" something or other.

No, it's not really these linguistic stunts. It's the temporary glow we get when we indulge in the same deceptions, when we fool ourselves into thinking we're a wee bit better than we know we are through creative use of language. It's the dangerous temptation to mistake illusion for reality.

What interesting relationships we now have. What fascinating new ones await us. For if you call my wrinkles "laugh lines," I'll call your bald patch a "smart spot." And your overwhelming vanity can be applauded as "self-improvement" if my lust can be lauded as "sensuality."

Our envy can be labeled "keeping up with the Joneses," and our anger admired as "assertiveness." Our gluttony shall be "nouvelle gourmet." Your sloth can be "laid back" if you'll allow my avarice to be sound business sense. And after we've transformed those seven little liabilities to seven daring steps to inner peace, grow senior along with me, sweetie, the best is yet to be! Come on, after all, what's so bad about sounding good?

Everything.

If we are not very careful, we will drown in the warm, comfortable seas of euphemisms around us. And nothing can save us but our good common sense. But then, it may not be that bad, at that. For when, after a lifetime of dining on Krab Flakes and juicy char-broiled tender chopped beef patties cooked to your special order, and living in domestic bliss with a like-minded person, you eventually do shuffle off this mortal coil, fear not!

For in this brave new world, death has no dominion. It's only a matter of passing on. And spending eternity the modern way in a tasteful marble mausoleum that's so pleasant, with its beautiful landscaping and piped-in music and graceful statuary, that the whole family will be tickled to visit you every Sunday until they pass on themselves or the sun cools, whichever comes first. And who could blame them? Or didn't you see that ad? ■

Edith Felber lives in Jericho.

Mother nurture

So parents are happy after all, even if we are just winging it day to day

THE SUNDAY SPECIAL

BY MARCIA BYALICK

Think for a second before answering, all you parents reading. Would you be happier if you never had kids?

Well, maybe not on the second Sunday in May or the third one in June. But numerous studies have found that parents were indeed less happy — and more depressed and had worse marriages — than nonparents. Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert wrote in his book "Stumbling on Happiness" that an act of parenting makes most people about as happy as an act of housework.

But two new studies, presented this month at the Population Association of America's annual meeting, call those earlier results into question. Despite the whoops of joy when the camp bus pulls away and the awesome stillness of an empty nest, this new research suggests that parents today are indeed happier for the choice they made.

Yet, just once, I'd like to get through a whole week feeling I did an excellent job of being a mother. By "excellent" I mean feeling 100 percent free of the possibility that my nurturing — either lax or tyrannical or ignorant — was the root cause of any insecurity or misstep experienced by my two daughters.

As long as I'm fantasizing, if those seven days could also pass without my being the subject of their eye rolling, that would be kind of nice, too.

You would think after four decades on the job, a person could speak with authority about it. I could do that about being a friend or a writer or even a wife. But a mother . . . not so much. There are just too many miraculous attributes required, demanding we protect and defend, 24/7, like Marines, from the moment we're aware of conception till our own lives end.

The spur-of-the-moment, fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pantness of it all demands we relinquish any claims to peace of mind. Warm, comforting laps and healing kisses are supposed to magically appear, without the benefit of any basic training. It's no wonder comments like, "Because I said so," and "I'm going to break every bone in your body," come out of the mouths of the most reasonable of us.

By virtue of its overwhelming demands, mothering is the role in which we make the most mistakes. Some we get away with; some we're haunted by for decades. At every stage — toilet training to table manners, sex education to explaining death — we are doing things for the first time, teaching more successfully as we learn what works.

Ironically, most of my friends and I believe we are better mothers than ours were. In fact, we get insulted when compared to the women who raised us, even as we echo their words. While the aprons, thimbles and ironing boards of my mother's generation were nowhere to be found in my home, there were a few behaviors that spewed out naturally under both our roofs.

I remember spitting on a tissue to clean a repulsed child's face, putting my hand out for chewed-up God knows what, and turning beyond red with frustration dealing with wet, knotted shoelaces. After hours of earnest dedication, both my mother's kids and my own had the weakest school costumes. Each of us checked our daughters' horoscopes daily, right after our own. And together we were in possession of a glance so withering it was known to elicit confessions and apologies instantly.

I remembering being terrified that my No. 1 child would always be so. A firstborn is, after all, the one you love the longest, the original experimental model. The children to follow are the kids with the sparse baby books.

A few decades into the job I learned each child in the family has a different mother, not better or worse, just different. The years taught me that my "No. 1 child" constantly changed, depending on who needed me most at that moment. The one with the fever, the one who didn't get into the sorority, the one who got tragically disappointing SATs.

The favorite then is the child you feel closest to at that moment, because no one can soothe her better than you. You love this child the fiercest because in that instant, all your manipulations, criticisms and pointed remarks are forgiven, understood as being part of the collateral damage that comes along with taking on an impossible job.

Nurturing, like exercise, is never ending — and it comes equipped with a constantly raised bar. Sacrifice wins out over ambivalence and exhaustion, whether you're giving your kid that last piece of cake you covet or spending years' worth of vacation money on tuition.

In return for this taken-for-granted magnanimity, we mothers withstand long periods of being hated. We handle the shock of seeing how ungracious our kids can sometimes be. And we live with the almost unbearable worry about their future in this frightening world.

"Ah, but when it works" was a bumper sticker on my neighbor's old Jaguar. Ah, but when the lessons of loyalty and devotion you would have sworn were ignored are reflected in your children's actions, when instinctively you come up with some bit of wisdom that saves the day, when you humbly sense you must be a much better mother than you thought to have raised such an incredible human being — that's when you realize the rewards of being the best that you can be.

Do women without children have fewer wrinkles? Probably. Are the dozens of economists, psychologists, Harvard professors and Nobel Prize winners who have spent years quantifying how parents were less happy/more depressed/less satisfied than nonparents, right on the mark, at least a few times a year? Probably.

Would every parent I know, after reviewing every last statistic, chart and graph, do it all over again? Absolutely.

Marcia Byalick lives in Searingtown.

THIS ILLUSTRATION BY M. RYDER

How the grown-ups stole Halloween

This night used to be all for the kids, but the retailers and adults took over

BY MARCIA BYALICK

Boo, humbug!

It's just about the only holiday on the calendar that's not about someone or something else. It's not patriotic or political. You don't need a sweetheart, like you do for Valentine's Day, or a specific ethnic heritage like St. Patrick's Day, or a religious commitment like Yom Kippur or Easter.

While Halloween began as a pagan rite marking the onset of the long, dark North European winter, our imagination and creativity turned Oct. 31 into a celebration of ridiculously cute pirates, ghosts, queens, ballerinas and spaceships.

And I hate it.

I started feeling negatively about Halloween when my kids got old enough to realize how lame their witch costumes made of garbage bags really were. We lived in a neighborhood of mothers who all seemed to have graduated from art school, and my daughter's friends walked around bedecked in professionally sewn, knitted, crocheted, painted and decoupaged disguises.

But at least they were walking. And they were original. Nowadays, the cars idle in front of my house as mothers wait for their pint-size over-the-counter Darth Vaders, Harry Potters and Jack Sparrows to return safely from their 5-foot trek up my walk.

When any kid over 10 rings my bell, I check for their stash of toilet paper, soap and raw eggs in case my candy selection disappoints them. I peer out of my bedroom window till I go to sleep, sure that any holiday based on extortion will lead to no good.

Celebrating the darker side of human nature is heralded for weeks, leading to the coining of a new word, "Falloween." The Consumer Trends Institute uses the term to describe how the simple decorations we once put up for a single night of trick-or-treating have expanded to front porches and yards loaded with bales of hay and garlands of golden leaves from Labor Day through Thanksgiving.

Almost a quarter of the candy sold annually is for Halloween night. This year, according to a survey conducted on behalf of the National Retail Federation trade group, Halloween spending is projected to be about $6.8 billion, with about a billion of that on costumes. The survey also found that three-quarters of adults will celebrate this once-quiet October night in some way. Eleven percent will dress up their pets.

TMS ILLUSTRATION/AL RYDER

I happen to be a big fan of dressing up and eating candy and enjoying meaningless fun, but there's something troubling about how we've altered this holiday. A once innocent night of excitement for children is now run by and for adults. Risqué, raucous and gruesome getups have replaced the ghosts and goblins of old. Formerly staid office cubicles are decorated with orange and black streamers. Otherwise rational young women use the night as an excuse to look dangerously provocative. And, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Halloween night has one of the highest proportions of alcohol-related traffic deaths — 44 percent — ahead of both Christmas night (38 percent) and New Year's Eve (41 percent).

What does it say about us that we've usurped our kids' holiday?

What does it say about what we fear and what we find thrilling? What does it mean when the party store in my neighborhood sells Dogzilla dinosaur costumes for golden retrievers?

It just might be that in our stressed-out world, being a grown-up is highly overrated. Giving ourselves permission to act outside our normal personas for a night allows our shoulders to drop away from our ears. We grab the opportunity to be inventive, to step back in childhood or to act out our inner Lady Gaga and Charlie Sheen. What real harm is there in stealing the spotlight for a few hours, gathering with friends, and gorging on too much chocolate?

None at all if we leave the sexy, boozy excuse for grown-up ill behavior behind, and return to a safe, silly, sensible Halloween.

Marcia Byalick lives in Searingtown.

FATHER FIGURES

Readers tell what their dads said or did to make a lasting impression

We learn many things from our fathers when we're young. And long after we become adults, we continue to learn, sometimes with a better understanding of how their influence has affected and shaped us. Lessons from Dad are special because they're a mix of memories and love that lasts a lifetime. Act 2 readers remember their first hero for Father's Day. **Here are some of their stories.**

Man of few words, but they counted

My father was a taciturn man. He almost never spoke to me, and when he did, it was in slow, deliberate sentences.

When I was 23, I had a graduate degree, but couldn't find a job in my field, so it was time to look for one in the city, but I was ignorant and fearful about traveling on the subway. Dad, an electrical engineer, came home the next day with a map of the subway system. But instead of teaching me how to get from here to there, he began to explain the history of the subway system. I cringed and steeled myself for a lengthy lecture. Within minutes, however, the tangle of lines with letters and numbers made sense. I felt confident and no longer afraid.

What he taught me that day was more than the subway system. It was that being thorough and attending to detail was the best way to teach, learn and understand anything — especially when it involved navigating life and the world.

Gerilynn Green,
Plainview

ON THE COVER
Samuel Chafetz at age 28 in 1953, holding his daughter Gerilynn, writer of the letter above. This photo was taken in the Bronx.

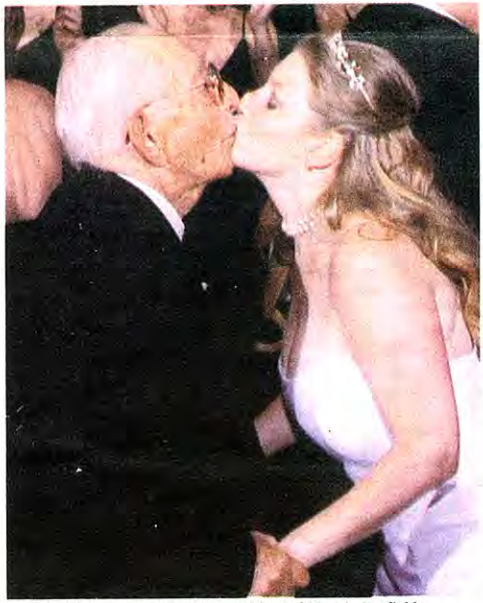
At 85, he still had lessons to teach

In his 70th year, my father, Al Finkelstein, lost his wife, moved to Florida, remarried, gave up pastrami and began lifting weights seven days a week. In the next 15 years, he nurtured friendships for the first time in my memory. At 85, he was midway through his second go-round as president of his condominium.

But my sister and I worried that the details of last month's minutes, this week's elevator malfunction and today's estimates for a new roof were becoming overwhelming for our father. As sensitively as we could, we started encouraging him to resign.

About 10 years ago, my sister and I decided to sweeten the deal by promising to fly down to Florida to hear his resignation. We figured he was uneasy about how he would fill his time once he was no longer president, so we researched suggestions for volunteer jobs, gathered brochures of places he might want to visit and compiled lists of movies he'd definitely enjoy. Armed with hugs and smiles to cushion the transfer of power, we arrived to rescue our dad from the stressful overload of his board position.

There must have been 100 people at the condo's monthly board meeting. Whether the result of luck or genes or financial security, the boundaries of old age were much broader and more diverse than we pictured. I was surprised to witness a lot less stress and anxiety on display that night than at the professional meetings my sister and I regularly attend. While it is still true that old age is not for sissies, could it be that if you were fortunate enough to get there, you could actually be happier than you were decades earlier?



Al Finkelstein, then 85, at the wedding of Marcia Byalick's daughter, Jennifer; he had lessons to teach about aging.

Then it was time. My father stood. My sister and I held hands. This was going to be hard for him. "I'm so pleased with the makeup of our new board," our dad said in a strong voice. Then he grinned. "And I look forward to accomplishing great things together in the coming years."

He had to be kidding. He wasn't resigning. And he didn't look the least bit sorry.

"Don't be mad," my sister whispered. "I'm relieved."

I sat in silence.

"If he messes up or finds it's too much for him, he'll resign then," she continued. "What makes us think we know better than he does what's best for him? We've never been old."

She was right. My bossy advice concerning growing older was a projection of my own fears. If my dad was slower at remembering facts and acting on them, he was wiser at reflecting and arriving at confident decisions. Added to teaching me the importance of telling the truth, the hidden rewards in hard work and how to understand a basketball game, he taught me one more valuable lesson. A happy, healthy old age lies not in the stars or in our children's advice, but in ourselves.

Marcia Byalick,
Searingtown

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WORDS OR LESS

Homebound

By Marcia Byalick

YOU KNOW HOW they have the witness protection program to hide those who testify against bad guys who, even behind bars, might seek revenge? Well, my friends and I, all parents of unmarried Gen-Xers, are jealous. We'd like a program that would offer us anonymous shelter as well. We may be the strongest, fittest 50-year-olds Long Island has ever produced, but our children are doing us in.

They're a reason we're targeted for products like Boost and Ensure, Vivarin and Sominex. Our kids were all precocious till they graduated from college. They understood computers at 10 and traveled farther and more often in their first two decades than some of us have in our entire lives. They took advantage of the options and choices we supplied and were so flexible in what they ate and studied and the relationships they pursued, that we applauded their courage and

'They finished school and the maturation process stagnated.'

thought them strong and ready to tackle adulthood.

Then something strange happened. They finished school and the maturation process stagnated. At an age when we were planting our roots, learning to share and sacrifice and choose life partners, our kids, still operating on College Standard Time, seem oddly without direction. First-rung salaries force many to move back home. Those lucky enough to move out live with three or four ever-changing roommates in barely safe neighborhoods and bring their laundry home on the LIRR. Parents expecting to be able to save some of the money they'd been spending on tuition all these long years find themselves subsidizing rents, buying winter coats and extending loans.

My friends with kids in their 20s living back home liken the situation to surviving a bad boss who gives you all of the responsibility but none of the power. It's not comfortable, in 1996, for parents and their grown children to still be so intimately connected. We shouldn't see their credit card bills, hear their phone conversations or worry about their lack of sleep . . . especially if we have no control over any of it. Since our parental training has always involved absorbing their bad moods and making better what hurts, when they're not happy, it's catching. Familiarity might not breed contempt, but it does kill privacy. And it breeds a scary uneasiness that this arrested development can go on until they're 30.

Our offspring are healthily selfish because we encouraged them to be so. They can't imagine that we wouldn't alter our plans to put their needs first. It's been their experience that is our job description. It was, but now we're the first generation to find ourselves fueling this kind of dependence for too long.

Don't get me wrong. I'd kill or be killed for my children. I just assumed that after college our day-to-day commitment to their emotional and financial well-being would lesson considerably. Until that day comes, there's always the dream of enrolling in the parent protection program.

Marcia Byalick lives in Searingtown.

LONG ISLAND OPINION

It's Winter, and I Really Hate It

By MARCIA BYALICK

I HAVE come to the conclusion that those who find winter exhilarating, and this time of year their favorite seasom, are very different from me. Whereas I'm sure I suffer from undiagnosed seasonal affective disorder, they speak of the beguiling glow the brief winter's day casts over the Long Island Expressway.

When I'm whining about my third lost glove or my fourth cold or the 20th splinter I got from carrying in some firewood, they look at me as if I'm from some wimpy parallel universe. I credit them with being a tougher, hardier, more energetic breed, maybe even nobler as well. How else to describe people who love the months where the Lilco bill rivals the mortgage payment, who don't mind if it's as dark when they get up in the morning as it is when they come home from work and who never cringe, as I do each evening, when the weatherman utters the English language's most useless and depressingly horrid phrase — "wind chill factor"?

Secretly, I think that winter lovers must mysteriously thrive on the oxygen from the plants they brought indoors while I, wearing my battery-operated socks, shore up on carbohydrates, multivitamins and chicken soup, they of the rosy cheeks persuasion are extolling the virtues of cross-country skiing in Caumsett State Park and ice skating at Christopher Morley.

After almost half a century of only using words like bleak and frosty, harsh and foreboding, to describe the season, I've decided it's time for an attitude adjustment. If William Cullen Bryant, buried right on Northern Boulevard, saw the North Shore's trees in winter as being "cased in pure crystal; each light spray nodding and tinkling in the breath of heaven," then maybe it's finally time for me to do more than observe and endure.

I have to admit that it's much quieter during the months after the leaf blowers leave and before the lawn mowers arrive. Winter, less other-directed than summer, spring and autumn, encourages the kind of solitude that can lead to inspiration. Life on Long Island can be so rich and fulfilling that opportunities to think, to appreciate the truths and lessons that define our lives, are rare. Try a walk on any golf course after it has snowed, a friend suggested, (probably the only time of the year you can be assured you won't be stepping in goose droppings) and see if the enchanting serenity of the peaceful scene before you doesn't chase all thoughts of dry skin, the flu, weight gain and humidifiers right out of your head.

What others find exhilarating leaves me cold.

For me, the real joy in winter is found in alleviating all memory of the cold and arriving at the state of "cozy." I think that's what many who say they enjoy the winter actually mean. Luckily, finding delicious and creative ways of keeping warm in our neck of the woods is an easy task.

Near a fireplace is the place to be, whether it's enjoying a hearty soup or sipping hot apple cider. If you're at home, snuggling under a down comforter and catching up on the classic films you've never found the time to watch can be a real treat. Now that football is almost over, renting long, engaging movies like "Anatomy of a Murder" or "The Seven Samurai" is a great weekend afternoon pastime.

And while I'll never get into making maple candy or building marshmallow igloos, there is something about preparing a cooked meal at this time of the year that is especially nourishing for the soul. One of the best secrets winter reveals is the spirit-renewing, tie-strengthening rewards of Sunday dinner with the family.

Psychologically, (if not meteorologically), surviving till February arrives has always meant that the worst of winter's weather is behind us. As far as I'm concerned, a month that includes Groundhog Day, Valentine's Day, President's Week and winter recess provides distraction enough to stop focusing on the negatives of the cold. That each is made into a commercial, contrived and catchy media event that is hawked unmercifully signals the end of winter's honesty.

So till the bluster turns to breezes, slip on your silk thermal underwear, put a few more logs on the fire and sip some smooth cognac. Then watch as the moments of sunlight increase with each passing day. ■

Marcia Byalick lives in Searingtown.

Cold, dry, warm, rainy . . . I don't care

BY MARCIA BYALICK

For most of my life on Long Island, I've been neither impressed nor depressed by the local weather. Once a season kicks in, if the temperature stays within 15 degrees of average, I tend not to pay too much attention. But lately I feel like I'm in the minority.

I'm not talking about the frigid February that was, or the frightening specter of that polar bear stranded on a block of ice; they certainly deserve our concern. But given that spring is here, weather is still a day-to-day obsession that I don't quite understand.

Among fans of the 24-hour Weather Channel is my husband, who sits mesmerized listening to atmospheric tumult. He's enthralled by the science, the power and the mystery behind everything from beach erosion to forensic meteorology. He watches footage of those who survived the latest deadly storm, eyes peeled on the radar map, calculating how far the chaos is from our block in Searingtown.

I get that high school girls need to know the temperature cause whole outfits depend on it. So do the farmers on the East End, women who love shoes, people running a marathon and brides getting married outdoors. But for the rest of us, what's the fascination with the endless combination and repetition of a relatively few weather patterns? Unless the Long Island Expressway is flooded or the schools are closed, who cares?

It appears, lots of us care. Someone once said nine-tenths of the people couldn't start a conversation if the weather didn't change once in awhile. Nothing unites an elevator quicker than a hot spell — or breaks the ice faster than an upcoming storm. Try talking to someone in Florida between October and April without mentioning the weather on Long Island. It can't be done.

I watch each night, but honestly don't listen as the meteorologist on the 11 o'clock news points to the weather map and explains where the fronts that will affect the air temperature at 8 a.m. are coming from.

I don't pay much attention unless the forecasters roll up their sleeves to show how the dire weather pattern approaching the Nassau border is stressing them out.

I'm amazed at how often, after all those facts are processed and interpreted, after all the statistics and charts about recordkeeping for this date in history, after the computerized maps showing the moment the first snow flake will hit Hicksville, their predictions are still wrong.

To me, how I feel about the weather has more to do with my mood than anything else. If I'm happy, I'm hyper-aware and appreciative of a beautiful day. If I'm down, it passes unnoticed. On a stressful Monday morning, it's hard to see the snow as an exhilarating blanket of white, or the rain as restorative and smelling of life.

It takes the songwriters and poets to get beyond the Long Island Rail Road morning commute and see the fog resting on the hill, the sunshine on your shoulder, the wonderland that is winter.

Under Mother Nature's leadership, pesky, uncertain weather will triumph, no matter how carefully the facts are researched.

As we head toward the best six weather months of the year, the one prediction I'll rely on is George Carlin's: "Tonight's forecast — dark."

Reader Marcia Byalick lives in Searingtown.

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my turn

In life and death, a family sees that love conquers all

My dad died five years ago this weekend; his second wife followed three months later. Their story offers a major lesson about love and loss.

After one year as a widower, my 72-year-old father decided to, again, forgo the willy-nilly wearing of black socks with navy pants; to, on occasion, change the radio station to something other than 24-hour news; to close the bedroom window — at least halfway — on cold, windy nights; and sometimes, without protest, to put on a sport jacket for dinner.

In other words, he remarried.

My sister and I attended his 1990 wedding in Florida, watching the newlyweds, with the hardest part of their lives behind them, commit to survive the rest in secure, comfortable companionship. At least half the guest list was made up of couples who remarried within the last 10 years. They came together, complete with children and grandchildren, assorted in-laws and friends, from the old neighborhood. They brought with them clothes picked out by former spouses, old photos of family vacations and celebrations and sentimental keepsakes of their previous lives.

What they all seemed to have in common was an appreciation for life at its simplest. Without the stress of having to "make it," they were freer to together enjoy the quiet breakfast denied in earlier, more hectic decades. Forgiving irritating habits is an easier task when the majority of your time is spent figuring how best to enjoy the hard-won fruits of life's labors. Their weddings, blessed by grateful children and prenuptial agreements, reaffirm their decision to write a new chapter in what has proved to be a completely unpredictable journey.

The naivete of first love is replaced by a healthy respect for the virtues of being needed. And the "spaces in your togetherness," essential to Kahlil Gibran's vision of a successful marriage, come more naturally to these mature, relative strangers dedicated to preserving the peace and enjoying the rest of their lives.

My weekend in Florida dispelled many myths and revealed unexpected lessons. First, not everyone wished the newlyweds well. My sister and I heard remarks like, "Don't worry, he'll never forget your mother." As if he ever could. Some relatives thought it supportive to say, "I know how hard this is for you," so sympathetically that any good coming from this union was completely negated. "You're one face with your mother," one old friend sniffed, watching my father and his bride dance the first dance.

More positive people came up with "only those from happy marriages remarry so quickly," telling us what we knew to be true — and wanted acknowledged. We laughed as we listened to the men make the same juvenile jokes they made 50 years before, about being "trapped," of "biting the dust" and "giving in." But we noticed the smile on our father's face when one of his cronies spilled wine on the tablecloth and, after a split second's panic, he remembered he didn't have to solve the problem alone. "I have a wife now," he said. "She'll figure out how to get it out."

BY ALICK FAMILY

The writer's father, Al, and his second wife, Neysa, celebrate their 20th wedding anniversary.

We found it revealing how each set of children forgave their brand-new stepparent anything but came down hard on their own. ("Dad, stop being obnoxious . . . put down that cigar . . . stop teasing her." And from the bride's children, "Mom, don't be so bossy . . . stop giving orders . . . leave him alone.")

I came home more convinced than ever that the romantic in me, the part that believes love heals, love conquers, love survives, love is all you need, is not sappy and sentimental but realistic and true.

The tough moments — the first time I heard them referred to as Mr. and Mrs., the physical closeness, the realization that my new stepmother, Neysa, might actually do some things better than my mother — were overshadowed by my gut feeling that our sense of loss was a separate issue, and there could be nothing bad or wrong with seeing our father this happy again.

I believe I got some long-distance confirmation of this fact. Just as the justice of the peace was to begin the wedding ceremony, the bride's sister, recently out of the hospital, was chilled and asked the bride if she had something to put over her shoulders. Neysa raced through my father's apartment, opening closets to find something suitable. She came back a few minutes later with a jacket and asked those assembled whom it belonged to and if her sister could borrow it. Out of everything in all of the closets, she had chosen the one piece of my mother's clothing I had saved.

"It's mine," I answered. "Of course, you can wear it." After the initial shock of seeing Neysa holding that wonderfully familiar jacket, still carrying my mother's scent, a strange calm came over me. How perfect, I thought, my mom's here, too. Rather than disturbing, the vibes felt warm and comfortable. She came to remind me that she, more than anyone, wanted to see my dad happy. She came to let me know that, as her child, being positive about this marriage had nothing to do with being disloyal to her. And she came to reaffirm what I've always believed, that the invincible power of love, in its purest and most unselfish state, can never be overestimated.

Marcia Byalick,
Searingtown

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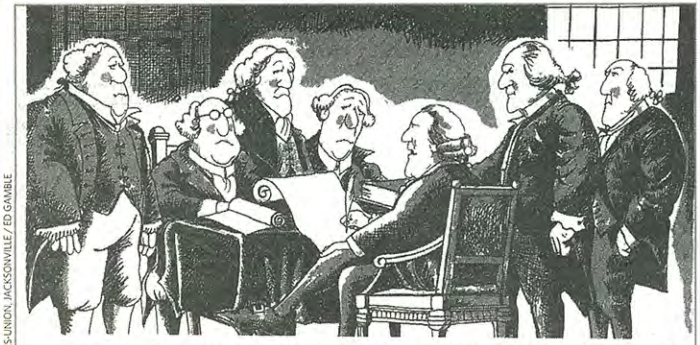

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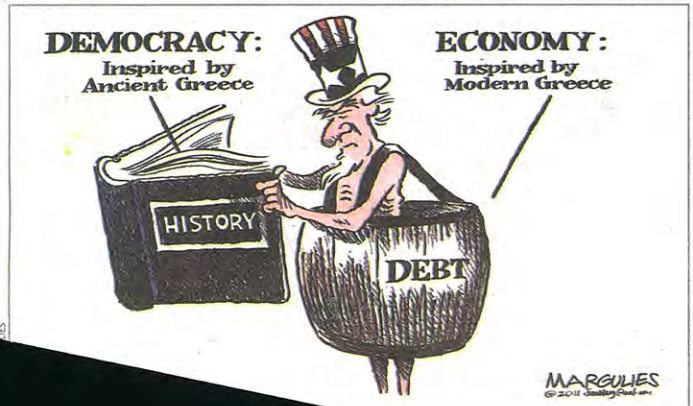

EXPRESSWAY

Diversity — so near, and yet so far

BY MARCIA BYALICK

Reader Marcia Byalick lives in Searingtown.

In my Brooklyn fifth-grade classroom, I remember Mrs. Feinbloom teaching us that New York City was our nation's shining example of a melting pot, a place where immigrants sought to be transformed into Americans who share a love for democracy, freedom and civic responsibility.

As I reflect on the state of our nation this Fourth of July weekend, I remember my pizza-eating, wrestling-loving grandmother, who could have been the original poster child for the melting pot concept.

She came here alone from Russia in 1914 when she was just 16. Wanting only to assimilate, she rarely talked of her homeland. She never got to go to school and in her 50s still struggled to read English. She considered Aug. 14, 1953, the day she became a U.S. citizen, one of the highlights of her life.

Thirty-five years ago when my husband and I moved to Searingtown with two toddlers, we exchanged density and congestion and economic and racial diversity for malls and elbow room and cars and Republicans. It was my embodiment of the American ideal — a single-family house surrounded by grass in a community made up of the grandchildren of European immigrants who, like me, made the trek eastward from Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx.

Today the ethnic makeup of my community has changed. A recent survey revealed that 69 languages are spoken by students in Herricks district schools. As much as 55 percent of the students are Indian, Japanese, Korean or Chinese, officials say. I am embarrassed to admit how for years I ignorantly lumped together my community's Asian population, disregarding diverse backgrounds.

Even as I took pride in the artistry of the high school orchestra and the number of science awards won by our district, I had little idea who I was proud of. No wonder the new owners of three houses on my street weren't exactly thrilled about having an unplanned conversation with a person like me.

I never run into my new neighbors in the supermarket, in local restaurants or at the movies. Rarely do I see them at the local shopping center or the hair salon. I watch their children walking to and from school and at the library, but rarely catch a glimpse of their parents.

So what is my relationship with the neighbors with whom I share a mailman, a state senator and a volunteer fire department? What else beside a ZIP code do we have in common? I figure we are all dedicated to a life of personal growth, and wholeheartedly oppose ignorance and fear-mongering. We have just one go-round in life, and it would be incurious for all of us not to take advantage of the learning opportunities a few feet away.

Because my home no longer includes kids, I have not been privy to the riches such cultural diversity can provide. Perhaps if I were still arranging play dates and car pools, I wouldn't feel so estranged from my new neighbors. Then again, maybe it's just the busy, stressed-out times that are to blame for each of us living such parallel lives.

And if, on the 235th birthday of our nation, "melting" is no longer an option, perhaps becoming a healthy, colorful chopped salad can be our new reality.

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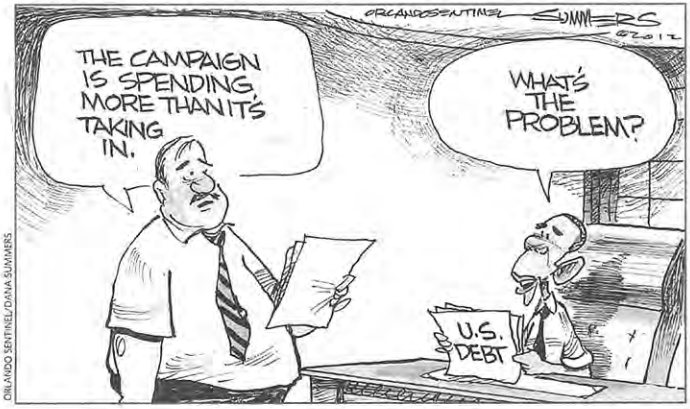

ORLANDO SENTINEL/DANA SUMMERS

ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION/MIKE LUCKOVICH

MATT BOOKIN

EXPRESSWAY

Don't miss the gifts of August

BY MARCIA BYALICK

Reader Marcia Byalick lives in Searingtown.

I think the last full month of summer has gotten a bad rap. Baseball's the only game in town. There's not one lousy holiday. And we're too cranky to shop or explore or learn. The movies might find sultry August days perfect for energizing activities like espionage, male strippers and foul-mouthed teddy bears, but for the rest of us, getting through this lackluster stretch can be tough going. We're aware of how we waited all year to swing on a hammock and read People magazine. We know that half a summer is much too precious a gift to waste on complaints. Yet it's hard to let go of the urge to achieve and simply appreciate this motionless, curiously silent month.

As far as I'm concerned, any month that produced science-fiction dreamers H.G. Wells and Gene Roddenberry has some life-enhancing lessons to teach. We just have to stay still long enough to absorb them. In a perfect world we'd be able, as the Parisians, Congress and most psychiatrists, to disappear under the shade for the entire month. For it's only when we're sitting still ... snoozing, contemplating, thinking ... that August reveals its purpose.

By the time we get to the eighth month of the year, we've earned our idleness. Far from being wasteful, it's essential. It's a soul-enriching opportunity to renew, rejuvenate and refocus the direction of our lives.

Chances are that since January we've been incredibly careless about keeping track of how we spend our time. Whole days are stolen and we don't even notice them missing. The masterful thief is the hectic pace we maintain. It keeps us absorbed in the future, and gives acquiring and maintaining things, being productive and getting ahead, more credence than they deserve.

It convinces us that we are legitimized more by what we do and what we own than who we are. August provides us with the glorious opportunity to catch our breath. It offers us time, shrouded in hazy humidity, to stop and reflect.

"The imagination needs long, inefficient, happy idling, dawdling, and puttering," writes Brenda Ueland in her book "If You Want to Write." She was giving instructions to aspiring writers, but she might just as well been suggesting August's agenda. Summer's end is the perfect time to let go, give in and be conquered by solitude. Before camp buses return and the tough chic clothes of fall appear, before thoughts of school supplies and red leaves and Filofaxes and new beginnings take over, we owe ourselves some idleness.

Augustus Caesar, after whom this month is named, pirated a day from February to make sure his month was as long as July, which was named after his predecessor, Julius Caesar. He couldn't have done so just to give us an extra day to be tired of summer. To whine about flies and slugs and sweat and thunderstorms. To berate ourselves for all the things we didn't get to do. I believe he slowed us down to give us a gift. Muse away.

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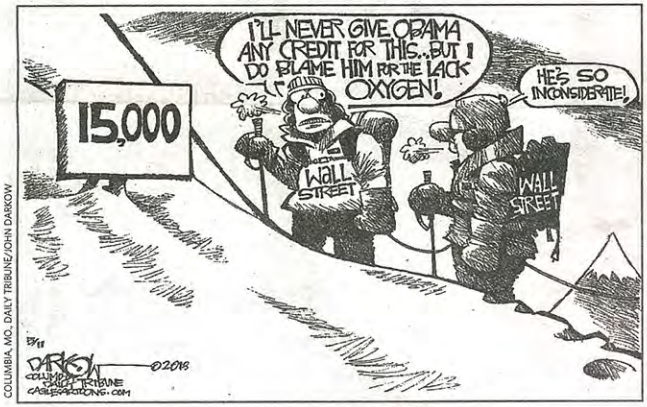

COLUMBIA, MO., DAILY TRIBUNE/JOHN DARKOW

AUGUSTA CHRONICLE/RICK MCKEE

EXPRESSWAY

In many ways, my mother lives on — in me

BY MARCIA BYALICK

Reader Marcia Byalick lives in Searingtown.

While I'd love to look back on a cherished silk blouse still smelling of my mother's favorite perfume, and give pieces of her most precious jewelry to my daughters, I can't. Memory hands me a past barren of her possessions but filled with recollections of fruitless hours trying to convince her she earned . . . deserved . . . so much more than she allowed herself. She regarded most material things as luxuries to be shunned, as if they reflected character weakness, or worse, waste. It's taken 25 years to understand exactly what she passed down to me.

Two bottles, forever in the medicine chest, were her sole concessions to female vanity. The fourth Friday night of every month, regardless of the 12-hour day she worked in my father's Brooklyn cleaning store, found her slipping on way-too-big yellow rubber gloves and painstakingly applying Clairol No. 43, Sun Bronze, to her hair. She would do that all her life, no matter how many times my sister and I begged her to have her hair colored professionally.

The other bottle, a large-sized Oil of Olay, completed my mother's beauty regimen. While anyone would swear the bottle was empty, she could eke out three more applications. I sighed at her frugality then, yet I'd hate to show anyone the condition of my toothpaste or my moisturizer before it lands in the garbage now.

My daughters, now adults, are appalled that the products in my makeup drawer are the same ones I've used since last century.

"What's wrong with brand loyalty?" I ask.

"Go check out Sephora in the Americana shopping center," they plead, hardly believing I'm not curious about that bastion of beauty products in Manhasset, less than a mile from my home.

I do get manicures and have my hair professionally colored, but not until both are obviously overdue.

I recently cleaned out the hall closet and found my mother's pocketbook, the one I took home from North Shore Hospital the day she died. It contained a wallet that didn't close properly because it was crammed with too many photos, a small mirror, a Bed Bath & Beyond coupon, lipstick about ready to be scooped out with a fingernail, a packet of tissues, and a pad and a pen — almost cloning what inhabited my own bag (minus cellphone) that day.

Looking through her things reminded me of the long-ago afternoon I cleaned out her night table before her house in Brooklyn was sold. I found years' worth of Mother's Day cards, a dozen unread magazine articles, reading glasses whose prescription had long since expired. Every item eerily had its twin in own my night table.

I look down at my mother's wedding band, complete with its original 65-year-old-guard. "Why bother to have it sized?" she used to say. "It feels just fine." The ring has a second lifetime, sitting snugly around my finger.

I fight the urge to use a tea bag more than once. I use Brillo and "elbow grease" to clean up after dinner, when both are overkill. I struggle to stop myself from saving plastic containers, rubber bands and shopping bags I couldn't use in two lifetimes.

It's a losing battle. Like the birthmark my mother and I share on the inside of our wrists, and the perhaps too passionate emotions we harbor for those we love, what I inherited from my mom, for better or worse, belongs to me forever.

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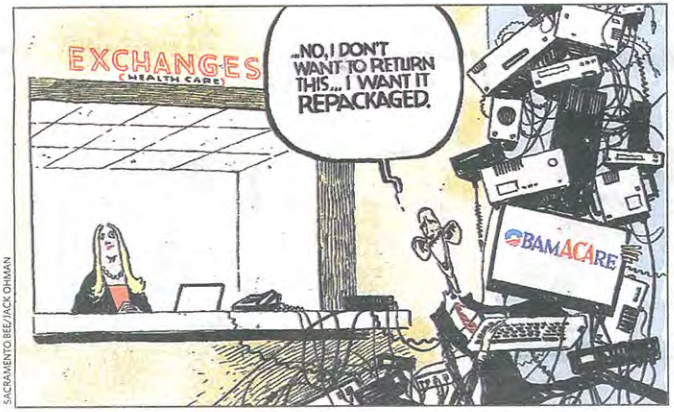

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EXPRESSWAY

My inventory of events in a year gone by

BY MARCIA BYALICK

Reader Marcia Byalick lives in Searingtown.

In France, when they can't remember something, they blame it on "a hole in the memory." Out the hole in my memory have poured not only the names of people I met yesterday, the passwords to most of my computer accounts and the plot of the movie I saw last week, but also what the heck happened in my life for whole months of 2013.

Without checking my calendar, I can't remember a thing that occurred in March … or May. All I remember is that June's weather was a disappointment and October's a pleasant surprise. It's like reviewing the '80s, when whole years happened, hundreds of days filled with triumphs and struggles and worries and hugs, leaving not one memory I can summon up without help. If I don't record the changes wrought by the departing 2013, they'll wind up in the same place as my high school yearbook, safe in storage, but completely inaccessible.

What was new in my life this year? Well, for the first time I understood why Apple refers to the young people who work at its stores as "geniuses." For better or worse, these young people changed me from a lifelong technophobe into a person who experienced a panic attack after forgetting her cellphone at home, and misplacing her suddenly can't-live-without iPad at a friend's house, both on the same day.

What else was new this year? I can't even remember what stood there before, but suddenly there are two urgent care centers within three miles of my Searingtown home, and two self-serve frozen yogurt establishments. And two new banks. Hard to figure what that says about my neighborhood.

For the first time, thanks to the new overhead signs indicating how bad the traffic is, I know after just half a mile on the Long Island Expressway whether it will take me 54 minutes or 21 minutes to get to the Queens Midtown Tunnel.

Suddenly in 2013, public meetings about the need to close schools or integrate the new Common Core curriculum became as contentious as European soccer games. And all year long the tenacity and quiet courage of those recovering from Sandy inspired admiration throughout the country.

This year, when a lifelong, high-maintenance friend unjustly accused me of upsetting her, for the first time in 30 years I did not apologize, choosing instead to use the break in our relationship to evaluate what goes on between us. And, when faced with a situation where six months of work on a stressful writing project was judged a failure by an inexperienced (and obviously wrong!) critic, I walked away instead of defending myself, for the first time realizing that quitting can sometimes be more noble than continuing to fight a losing battle.

This year I also did a few things for the last time. I bought my last expensive skin-tightening baloney in a bottle, I stopped obsessing about the evils of red meat and sunshine, and I put a quotation — "Worry is interest paid in advance for a debt that never comes due" — on the bulletin board above my computer.

May your 2014 be full of successful, life-enhancing first times, and as many satisfying, soul-enriching last times. And may you remember them all at year's end!

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LONG ISLAND
OPINION

In 1985 I Resolve Not to Mix Wishes And Resolutions

Rosalind Ivens

By MARCIA BYALICK

AT this time of year, more than any other, I am reminded of all the promises I've made, the discipline I've let lapse, the self I've let age "unimproved," so as 1985 approaches, thoughts of new year's resolutions fill my guilty head.

Should I concentrate on increasing my vocabulary or sharpening my memory, tightening my stomach or estimating my budget, organizing my closets or unclogging my arteries? Should I say yes more often to new experiences, or no more often when I'd rather not "experience?"

A look through any bookstore will convince you of our obsession with self-improvement. I wonder if the whole world is similarly afflicted; if, for example, the Chinese also see themselves as sorry messes in need of advice on flattening, thinning, beautifying and restructuring all aspects of what obviously must be an unsuccessful life.

I decided to look further into this individual ritual of self-examination by asking many of the people who make up my world what they "resolve" for the new year. I hoped that this knowledge would increase my motivation and therefore decrease the difficulty in keeping my own word.

Many people, I realized immediately, confuse resolutions with wishes. "I want to stay healthy," "I want to be happy" are promises fueled by divine will, not the commitment to do hard work that I was asking about.

A "good" resolution is entirely possible to fulfill. Whether it concerns breaking a bad habit (biting nails, smoking) or introducing a new routine (regular exercise, healthy diet), its success or failure is entirely self-determined. While it is easy to make a list of improvements needed by those around us, it's difficult to focus on the changes within ourselves that will be most rewarding.

Our resolutions tend to become less grand with age. Children use words like "never" and "always" in their vows, absolutes that adults know better than to promise. I pooled six of my 11-year-old daughter's friends for their 1985 resolutions. This is a sampling of their ideas:

¶I will never suck my thumb again.

¶I will always knock before going into my brother's room and always close the door when I leave.

¶I will never leave my social studies project for Sunday night.

¶I will practice my clarinet for a half hour at least four times a week from now on.

¶I will stop eating so much junk food.

¶I will never stuff gum wrappers under the couch pillows again.

¶I will stop taking off my jeans inside out and leaving them on the bathroom floor.

The underlying theme here is "If I obey those around me and satisfy their demands, then my life will be easier to get through." This completely changes in adolescence.

I asked six teen-agers, aged 14 to 18, what pledges they would like to make for themselves this year. Their lists were significantly shorter (each one mentioned only one or two items), and their goals were much more difficult to achieve. They said:

¶I want to get up the courage to be an individual.

¶I want to care less what everyone else says and does and wears.

¶I want to be more serious about saving money.

¶I want to do better in school (said by all, A students included).

It seems to me they all wanted to win, to shine, to star in whatever their field of interest was. And all hoped for the fortitude to dare to be themselves.

The adults in my far-from-scientific study were the hardest on themselves. No. 1 among their resolutions was to lose weight. No one had a health problem, just a poor body-image problem. All knew the overwhelming odds against losing and keeping off the disgusting 10 to 20 pounds that separated them from the "beautiful people." All had vowed to rid themselves of weight in countless resolutions. And all swore that this was the year willpower would win over sloth.

There were no "nevers' " or "always" in this crowd, just a gentle moderating of habits that are prone to excess. They wanted to indulge less, be lazy less, be disorganized less. Each had a leftover goal from years past (to learn to take a really good picture, to try scuba diving, to read Proust) that they were determined to achieve this year.

Again and again, almost as an afterthought, I heard, "I'd like to communicate more, be more attentive, listen more carefully to my family." There seems to be an awareness of time's passing that my contemporaries are not ready to deal with but that cannot be completely ignored.

Armed with the knowledge of how those around me are planning to improve themselves, it's time for me to formulate my own list. I will try to remember an old Hindu proverb that says, "There is nothing noble about being superior to some other man. The true nobility is being superior to your previous self."

¶I resolve to slow down, to smell the roses and watch the sunset rather than run the red light and curse the slow bank teller.

¶I resolve to practice my patience, trying not to cut what I can untie, not to make judgments instinctively without careful consideration.

¶I resolve to look through eyes that see the days after Dec. 21 as getting longer instead of dreading the dark and cold, which always fulfills my expectations.

¶I resolve to give myself 20 minutes a day, for me — to take a bath, read a magazine or just stare into space, "alonetime, where children, telephone and responsibility are on hold. This is much time to relax, destress, unwind.

¶I resolve to forgive myself for falling short of what I should be, or even what I could be, even if it means not fulfilling my five resolutions.

If I analyze the reason for making resolutions, I guess it's simply to get through this lifetime more comfortably between its outer limits of boredom and suffering. I wouldn't aspire to such a lofty goal as happiness, for I agree with Russell Baker that happiness is a small and unworthy goal for something as big and fancy as a whole lifetime and should be taken in small doses." Here's wishing you all many small doses for the coming year. ■

Marcia Byalick lives in Searingtown.

Echoes of a campus triangle resound two decades later, and the winner takes a long-delayed measure of triumph from a startling telephone call.

All About My Guilt Flip

BY MARCIA BYALICK

IT was 9 o'clock of a recent Saturday night when my 15-year-old daughter yelled upstairs that I had a phone call.

"She won't give me her name, Ma. She says she's a blast from your past and wants to surprise you."

I wasn't in the mood for old friends. If I'd had any interest in talking to her, I would've talked to her yesterday.

"Hello, Marcia? Guess who?" said a gruff voice, instantly familiar but just out of memory's grasp. Already I knew why she was an old friend.

"It's been 24 years," she continued. "I was going through some old albums and I just had to call."

Hmm. Brooklyn College era. Twenty-four years but she knew my married name. "Give me one more hint."

"I finally don't hate you anymore."

Luckily, my hate fan club had only one member. I'll call her Carole. She prattled on about moving, teaching, her children and her marriage. But my thoughts wandered back a quarter of a century to the Carole I once considered a good friend — before she grew to hate me.

Carole was two years older than I. She had thick, shiny black hair, beautiful dark eyes and a golden tan 12 months a year, the result of sitting with a reflector at Murray's Sun Deck, an alleyway with folding chairs on the boardwalk in Brighton Beach. We met at Brooklyn College, when her warm smile and ditzy sense of humor convinced me to join her sorority. She was a cashier in the campus coffee shop and I loved going in and paying for coffee and an English muffin, no matter what I ate. We went away to the Concord on spring break, and she wore her high school prom dress one night just to make us laugh. Our relationship had few conversations dealing with anything "heavier" than boys and bad haircuts, but it was ultimately satisfying to both of us.

In May, a year and a half into our friendship, Carole introduced me to her latest love. He was exotic, having graduated from an out-of-town college, and she swore he was THE ONE. His name was Bob; he drove a great red convertible; they were to be pinned after the summer, when she came home from working as a counselor at a camp in Maine.

"Marcia, I need you to do me a favor," she said as school was ending. "I really hate leaving Bob alone all summer. I mean, I know he cares about me, but what if he's lonely and meets someone else? I'd feel so much better if you'd keep an eye on him — and let me know if you think I'm in trouble."

"You want me to babysit? Sure." I was working in my father's dry-cleaning store that summer, and by comparison this undercover assignment sounded positively glamorous.

I spoke to Bob twice a week and saw him often. I wrote long, reassuring letters telling Carole how much he missed her, how bored he was without her, how I wound up going to the World's Fair with him 'cause he had two free tickets and had no desire to even look for a date. Long, comforting letters telling her how we both missed her and couldn't wait for her to come home. And every word was true. I even went up to Maine with him to see her and sighed watching them dance and kiss and wondered when I too would be so blessed.

But when Carole got home things weren't the same. Bob changed his mind about getting pinned. He complained that she bit her nails and laughed too loud. She was devastated when they broke up.

A month later he called and asked me out. I was truly surprised, explained that I was flattered, that I thought he was a great guy, but that I could never go out with him. What kind of friend would I be if I did? He told me that the fact that it was over between him and Carole had nothing to do with me, that we owed it to our friendship to explore if it could go any further. I said no. And no again four more times in the next three months. The fifth time I said yes. And then yes again the next year when he asked me to marry him.

My relationship with Bob made me the Scarlet Woman of Bedford Avenue. I was totally miserable socializing at lunch and between classes till she graduated that June, and I was sure Carole hated me. So, 24 years later, I hid behind a pillar, guilty and embarrassed, rather than say hello to her brother at Bob's recent high school reunion.

Now she was on the phone. She chattered on for a few minutes more. Then, an awkward silence.

She took a deep breath.

"You must be wondering why I called. Mike told me that he saw Bob at their high school reunion, and that he came alone. I figure now if it's over with you guys, you wouldn't mind giving me his number."

I glanced over at Carole's fantasy. He was wearing torn red underwear and black socks and was watching his third football game of the day while eating a salami sandwich (with melted Velveeta on a bagel).

"He's right here, lying next to me," I replied with deceptive sweetness. "Would you like to speak with him?"

There was silence on the other end.

"Bob, it's for you," I said evenly. I handed him the phone and left the room.

I bounded down the steps thinking of what I wouldn't do to have my old boyfriend call after all this time, still thinking of me, still wanting me. I knew that it would take a woman to truly appreciate this scenario, that the wonder of still being the object of an old flame's fantasy would be wasted on Bob. He probably wouldn't tell his friends — or even revel silently in his coolness.

But that's OK. I love telling the story. And the glazed look in his eyes 15 minutes later when I came back into the bedroom convinced me that we had both made the right choice.

Marcia Byalick is managing editor of The Women's Record, a monthly newspaper.

ILLUSTRATION BY
BARBARA HARTWELL

. . . The Awakening of a Naturalist

By MARCIA BYALICK

"THE Town of North Hempstead is preparing to reconstruct the sidewalks, curbs and the pavement on your street," the letter began. "Many of the mature trees are surface rooted and it is not possible to protect them and properly install new curbs and sidewalks. It has been determined that one tree in front of your home will need to be removed."

I sighed the sigh of the environmentally ignorant, the politically lazy, and went about my day. I couldn't even name the tree in front of my house, let alone summon the energy to fight City Hall.

Then, two blocks away, the voracious, disrespectful destruction began. I'm not sure why, but I started taking pictures of the gruesome project undertaken to improve the quality of life by smoothing out the sidewalks. I noticed a few of my neighbors doing the same, as if no one would believe how awful this was unless we had the evidence. Grand, dignified, powerful half-a-century-old trees became silent, wounded stumps of ruin. My neighborhood resembled a war zone. No longer could I look up from my computer and be soothed by the protective, immortal life energy that was a silent witness to the passing seasons of my life for the last three decades.

The man who rang my bell to tell me this was the day my tree would be removed just shrugged when I told him he had to have one of the lousiest jobs around. "Most of these trees are diseased," he said by way of explanation. As I made myself watch them saw down my tree, I thought of how trees seem resigned to the way they live. When the crew was done, I went out to look at the stump. My vibrant tree showed no signs of being sick.

Then my neighbor who knows about these things told me that only about 12 of the 50 trees they killed (removed is too benign a word) were diseased.

That no one on my block is trying to sell his house at this moment is a blessing. How attractive is a home with no shade, situated on a moonscape? Whoever has come to visit this week comments that after making the turn onto my block, they became disoriented, staring at familiar houses isolated on a blank canvas. Instead of graceful, mature trees, we will have uniform curbs and sidewalks without bumps. Who would vote for such a tradeoff?

The letter ended with the promise, "Upon completion of the road construction work, the town will plant replacement trees throughout the project area." I signed a neighbor's petition requesting that "mature trees be planted in an attempt to restore our development to its former appearance." Forgive me if I'm not too optimistic. How could the same people who wreaked such wanton, senseless havoc be expected to listen sympathetically?

I don't know if I believe trees have souls, but they definitely express glory and strength and tenderness and awesome beauty. They have to be among everyone's top 10 "most taken for granted" reason for moving to the suburbs.

A neighbor whose tree is scheduled to be removed next week swears she's chaining herself to her tree. Before this experience I would have laughed. Now I'm sorry I didn't think of it.

I'm trying hard not to bad-mouth the engineer and job supervisor and the commissioner who rudely dismissed any conversation about saving at least some of the healthy trees. You don't have to be a sentimental animal lover or an activist of any kind to have been affected by this wholesale devastation. To think this wasn't a good idea, you just have to be alive. ■

Marcia Byalick, a freelance writer, lives in Searingtown.

Long Island

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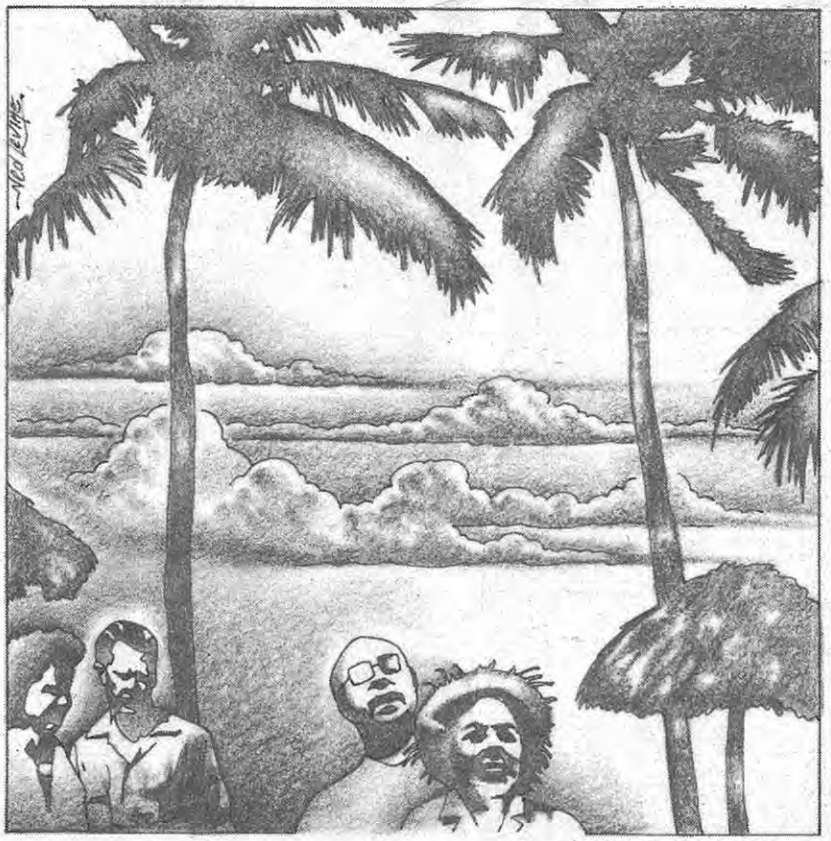
Such a Lovely Young Couple, What Could Be Wrong?

By Marcia Byalick



Newsday Illustration / Ned Levine

Lush and ripe, soft and warm — words never used to describe Long Island in February — described the two-week Hawaiian vacation of our neighbors, the Bergmans.

George and Helen, celebrating their 40th wedding anniversary, hadn't counted on meeting the Davises, a young couple from Oregon. The four shared a car, sightseeing tours, dinners and golf. Although there was a 20-year age difference, the two couples seemed mutually flattered at the unexpected chemistry between them.

On their last night together, as they traded telephone numbers and addresses, they made a toast vowing to maintain their relationship beyond Hawaii. Bill said he came to New York a few times a year on business and they would be together again soon if Helen kept her promise of a home-cooked meal including gefilte fish, kasha varnishkas and brisket.

One morning a few weeks ago the Bergmans' phone rang.

"Hello, Helen?" a man's voice asked. "Is this the beautiful Helen Bergman who's wasting herself with a man who will probably never break 100 in golf in his entire life?"

Helen was startled, then excited. "Bill, how wonderful to hear your voice! Where are you?"

"We're in New York staying at the Plaza. Susan and I got in last night and we have to leave tomorrow morning but we just had to say hello. Do you think it's possible for you and George to come in to the city tonight for a drink?"

"Absolutely not. If we were in Oregon I'm sure you'd invite us to your home, and if it's not too much trouble for you to get here, I've got all the ingredients in the house for that real Jewish meal you both never had."

"Okay, Helen, you're on. We'll be there around 7 o'clock." Helen spent the rest of the day happily preparing for dinner. When George called and heard the news, he was delighted.

"Where are they staying? Maybe I'll pick them up on my way home. You know what a cab will cost them." "The Plaza," said Helen.

George called back a few minutes later to say they weren't registered at the Plaza. Was she sure it wasn't the Palace or the Pierre?

Helen honestly thought it was the Plaza. "Just come home and change," she said. "You could use the hour to relax anyway. Besides if they've gotten this far, they'll find us."

Promptly at 7 o'clock the doorbell rang. After the initial clumsy hugs and kisses, Bill and Susan sat down in the living room. There seemed to be a stiffness in their demeanor that the Bergmans were determined to overcome.

"Maybe we should all take off our clothes and put on bathing suits," joked George. No one laughed.

"Could I see the pictures of our trip?" asked Susan tightly.

"Of course," said Helen. "I'll go get them, they're in the bedroom."

"Why don't you make some drinks, George, while I get the pictures," said Helen, sending her own puzzled thoughts into George's eyes.

Things eased a bit as they all laughed at the experiences the pictures revealed. Helen watched as Susan separated the pictures of her and Bill from the rest. "Do you mind if I take these negatives?" she asked. "I'd love to make copies."

"Of course," said Helen, wondering why Susan took both the negatives and the pictures.

They finished their drinks and Helen was about to start getting dinner when Bill slowly stood up. In the voice of a stranger he said,"Helen, get me your jewelry."

"Excuse me?" she said, her ice-cold hands knowing before her conscious mind what was about to happen.

Bill took a gun from the inside of his jacket pocket. "Please let's do this quickly. Bring me your rings, those diamond earrings, the gold bracelets and that emerald pin you wore."

George stood up. "Is this a joke or what?"

Susan gathered up all the pictures and put them in her bag. She kept her eyes down until Helen returned with the jewelry. The next few minutes passed in a blur. George and Helen tied up to their kitchen chairs, the calls to the police followed by fruitless calls to hotels and airports, all confirming what the Bergmans would take days to truly assimilate.

To the police it was clear and simple. "They're professionals, those two. They travel from resort to resort, making contact with a few likely couples in each place. They use phony credit cards and different aliases and support themselves in grand style."

Helen's naked fingers told nothing of the violation of her trust. George's insurance claims told nothing of his shattered sense of self. They would never be the same. □

Marcia Byalick lives in Albertson. This is a true story, but the names have been changed.

BY MARCIA BYALICK

so, what are you doing new year's eve?

What is so special about this particular night that makes or breaks all our dreams?

MY FRIEND MARGIE CALLS it the Big Lie. Her friend Jane calls it the dreaded loneliest night of the year. George Bernard Shaw named it a "working definition of hell." The event that inspires such loathing? New Year's Eve. Whether you're home alone, feeling like a pimpled adolescent not asked to the prom, or at a party where the crowd is trying a bit too hard to be festive, finding happiness on New Year's Eve is not easy.

Women seem especially vulnerable to New Year's Eve syndrome, a malady marked by extreme anxiety tempered with indefatigable hope. Experience imparts no wisdom: no matter how many disappointing New Year's Eves have passed, we cling to the fantasy that the next one will deliver.

The cycle of New Year's Eve promise and disappointment begins early in life. My friend Nanette recalls December 30 of her senior year in high school, when she ran into handsome, popular Jason at a local hangout. She could barely breathe. After a few minutes of small talk, he looked into her eyes and asked the question she telepathically had willed: "Are you doing anything tomorrow night?" She smiled and said no with all the calm she could muster. "Oh," he replied, and sauntered off.

My friend marks this conversation as her induction into the bizarre world of man-woman relations.

A few years ago, Kerry decided that what was missing from her previous New Year's Eves was the spontaneous, the daring, the dramatic. Recovering from a six-week bout with mono, she decided (on the morning of December 31) to use her frequent-flyer bonus ticket to go to Puerto Rico. Feeling charming and uncharacteristically bold, she booked a flight without giving a thought to such mundane details as hotel reservations. She arrived in San Juan mid-afternoon to find the tourist office—the source she had counted on for accommodations—already closed. Undaunted, she enlisted a cabdriver's help in finding a vacancy, and eventually she checked into a musty, overpriced room in a local hotel. It was now nearing the bewitching hour, so she hurriedly showered, slipped into a slinky black strapless, and headed for the hotel lounge, where she found her entrance to the nightclub barred; no one without reservations was being admitted. Likewise, the dining room. So Kerry spent New Year's Eve alone in her hotel room, staring at a TV that wouldn't work, feeling as though she were ushering in *1984* the novel, not the year.

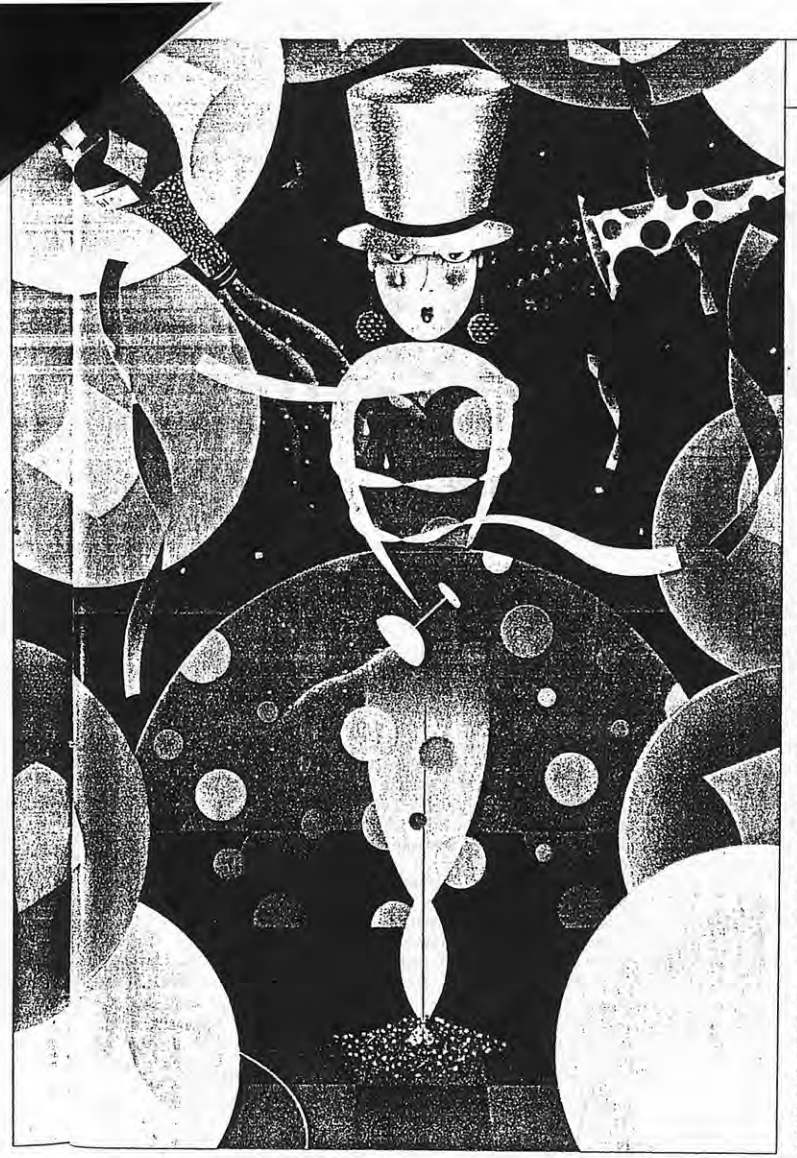
Life's heartaches and insensitivities take on a surreal quality when they occur on December 31. Beth knows that this New Year just has to be better than the last one, when her date, an arrogant member of New York City society, left town without a word a few days before the big night. The headache she developed from spending the better part of the thirty-first wondering whether he would show caused a fight that began with his arrival at nine and lasted until year's end.

The year before, Beth had been romantically involved with a married man who *swore* he was going to leave his wife after the holidays. Since they couldn't spend the evening together, he invited her over to his work studio at five-thirty that afternoon for an early, wistful welcoming in of the New Year. In true Keystone Cop fashion, his wife arrived mid-celebration. Beth actually hid in the proverbial closet, made her way down the back stairs when they left the room, and, too embarrassed to face the doorman, snuck out of the building via the service entrance. All that separates this scenario from a teary forties movie is the background music, a snowstorm, and a taxi hurtling out of control and heading toward her.

Rita recalls the winter she was nursing a broken heart and did not feel up to the usual New Year's fanfare. She considered the possibility of sleeping through New Year's Eve, but her good friend Kate convinced Rita to join her for a quiet evening at home. However, when she arrived at Kate's apartment, champagne in hand, Kate greeted her with the news that she had accepted a neighbor's invitation for them both to attend a simple New Year's Eve dinner. Rita hesitated—after all, if she had *wanted* to be surrounded by celebrators she could have gone to parties thrown by her *own* friends—but finally relented. How awful could dinner with Kate and one couple be? she reasoned. As it turned out, it wasn't Kate's friends who made her want to weep into her French onion soup but the hostess's sister, who was there with her brand-new fiancé. All through the meal, Rita had to fight back tears as the young lovers, unaware of Rita's broken engagement, spoke glowingly of each other, of the love they had found together, and of what a relief it was not to be out in the "meet market" anymore.

When midnight approached, Rita escaped to the bathroom, where she quietly sobbed into a guest towel as the clock struck midnight. She now knows indisputably that there *are* worse things than ringing in the New Year alone.

One risky choice is to arrange a blind date. Some women think so little of their own company that they'll accept dates with strangers for New Year's Eve. After hearing Susan's description of the way she heralded 1985, I think we should no longer consider this an option.



JULIA GORTON

"He sounded fine, he was a dermatologist new to the area, and he had gotten my phone number from a former roommate of mine," explains Susan. "She was away on vacation so I couldn't speak to her about him, but we were just going to the movies and dinner, so what did I have to lose? As it turned out, the initial phone call was the best part of the date. I opened the door at eight p.m. to behold a man who weighed less than my hundred and ten pounds. When we got on the elevator and he started talking about his pet snake, I swear I began looking for Allen Funt and his candid camera! He took me to a cult movie called *Faces of Death*, and as we sat watching the most heinous kinds of death imaginable, all I could think of were my three girlfriends who were at that very minute watching a rented movie (probably *Annie Hall*), drinking margaritas, and waiting to attack three quarts of chocolate chip ice cream at midnight."

Even on the rare occasions when the fantasy promised by New Year's Eve is delivered, rude reality often intrudes. Linda, a beautician, put aside her tip money for two months so that she could spend New Year's Eve club-hopping through New York City's elite night spots. The evening did not disappoint. There were ceilings draped in white silk with thousands of gold and silver lamé streamers floating down. There were centerpieces made of exotic orchids suspended in pink water. The black-tie crowds were perched elegantly on velvet-cushioned chairs encircling low European tables. Waiters in short tuxedo jackets served fluted glasses of bubbly. Linda reveled in this embarrassment of riches. It was after midnight when, keenly aware of how fleeting are such moments, she decided to commemorate the evening with a special toast. She announced to the eight friends sitting at her table that this magical night was one of her best ever, and she wanted to buy a drink for everyone who had made it special. The waiter came with the drinks and Linda discreetly motioned for the check.

When she looked at the bill, she felt sick. It was $25 per drink. Two hundred dollars for eight drinks. And what do you tip the waiter? She had only $50 in her evening purse. Red-faced and perspiring, she whispered to her date that she needed to borrow some money. He smiled condescendingly and said he would take care of it. Poof. There, exposed as the haircutter she was, she felt the way Cinderella must have when she didn't leave the ball on time. Suddenly Linda's feet hurt. She noticed that some of the men in the band were wearing makeup. The carpeting under her chair had a stain. It was only Thursday night, after all. The hard New Year had already begun.

If you have yet to finalize your plans for this New Year's Eve, don't despair. No one I know is doing anything special. In fact, no one I've ever spoken to has had the kind of magical New Year's Eve we all feel we've been denied.

This year, I'm hosting a "gala" of my own, issuing an open invitation to all friends weary of December 31's frenetic pace. The low-key agenda will be made known, to insure no risk and allow no disappointment. I'll play music from the sixties, prepare tried-and-true recipes, and encourage easy conversation. For if there is one thing I've learned, it's that December 31 is not a good time for experimentation. Far better to celebrate with those who have shared our joys and disappointments of 1987 and who will be there for us again in 1988.

Thomas Mann once said, "Time has no divisions to mark its passage, there is never a thunderstorm or blare of trumpets to announce the beginning of a new month or year. Even when a new century begins it is only we mortals who ring bells and fire off pistols"—and we mortals who put too heavy a burden on finding fulfillment on the last night of the year. □

Marcia Byalick is associate editor of The Women's Record, *a Long Island, New York, newspaper.*

THE MOST EMBARRASSING MOMENTS EVER

If you've ever made a red-faced fool of yourself, you're wonderfully, 100 percent human.

BY MARCIA BYALICK

"IT IS VERY EASY TO FORgive others their mistakes. It takes more guts and gumption to forgive them for having witnessed your own."
—Jessamyn West.

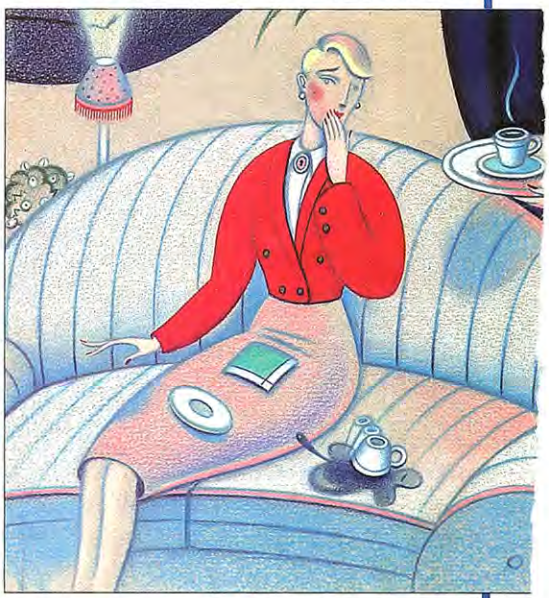
There is nothing in life to compare with the excruciatingly painful and crushing emotion of embarrassment. We blush, yet our blood runs cold. We cringe, then say things like, "I thought I would die," or, "I wanted to crawl into a hole." We feel foolish to the nth degree, exposed to the world as the nerd only we know we are. What's so deadly about this complex reaction is that it always catches us unaware. One minute we're a stable, role-playing member of the human race, the next we're in the corner wearing a dunce cap. That wrong word or misstep traps us in the quicksand of the ridiculous. Maybe, given the aplomb of a Fred Astaire, we could tap-dance the moment away with only minor trauma; but for most of us mere mortals the choice is just to stand there . . . and sink.

Even television caters to the pleasure people get in seeing others embarrassed. For years Alan Funt and his crew for the television show *Candid Camera* would set up their ABSCAM-like plots to catch some innocent in a farfetched practical joke. Now humorous humiliation consists of catching the famous. These film clips of mistakes (or blunders and bloopers, as they are cutely called) cut heroes down to fools' size. We see Humphrey Bogart fall off a chair, President Reagan sing the wrong words to a song, Katharine Hepburn curse after flubbing a line—and we laugh. We see Gerald Ford fall down a few steps, Bob Hope have the hiccups, Edward G. Robinson forget the name of a good friend—and we laugh.

Embarrassment's saving grace is that while the pain is intense it is short-lived. As soon as we get some distance from the incident, a strange thing happens. We laugh—at ourselves and others; the more horrendous the situation, the more hilarious the retelling. We each have our own personal favorites. My grandmother told of attending her close friend's funeral 50 years ago on the Lower East Side of New York City. She was totally overcome and walked into the funeral parlor crying. She sobbed quite loudly, and when she got herself under control, she walked up to the coffin to say good-bye. There lay not her best friend, Bessie, but some very distinguished-looking gentleman. At that moment my grandmother looked around to see the other mourners, especially the dead man's wife and daughter, staring at her. Covering her face with her handkerchief, my grandmother backed out of the room amid whispers of "must be a sweetheart" and "what did I tell you about him." Once out in the street she realized she'd been at the wrong place; Bessie was lying in the funeral parlor right next door. After 50 years we still laugh; my grandmother loves telling a surefire hit anecdote, and we love picturing that first family and their distrusting minds.

My own embarrassing moments still make me quake inside. There was the time in eighth grade, the second week in a new school, when the elastic waistband of my underwear snapped as I walked through the halls. With each step, my underwear slid further down until, when it reached my knees, I let it fall to the floor, stepped out of the legs, and kept on walking. I never looked back but I know somebody saw—and if I met them today I'd probably still cringe. There was the moment at high school graduation when I was asked to accept the perfect attendance award for never missing a day of school in four years. There couldn't be a more uncool attribute to be praised for, and I felt my membership as one of the guys expire immediately. Oh, if only I hadn't been there to accept it!

I can remember being invited to a swanky bridal shower just a month after I had married. We had received two identical crystal vases, and I knew giving this beautiful gift would reveal my fine taste, not my bad manners. What I forgot, however, was to remove the original card. As the prospective bride opened my carefully rewrapped present, I saw her take out a card I didn't write. Sitting in a room, knowing no one, and being sure no one there had ever been exposed to such behavior, I felt faint. What saved me was that the bride laughed as she said, "You must have been drunk when you wrote this. It says, 'To Marcia, Love Gail,' instead of 'To Gail, Love Marcia.' " I blessed my dear friend Gail for being so named. I thanked God for letting me off the hook, and I never again gave a gift that I received.



DAVE CALVER

My worst moment, when no savior intervened to lessen the agony, came as I stood in front of four college examiners for my oral presentation required for a degree in education. Two of us were scheduled to present that day. The other girl went first. It took me a minute to realize she was blind. Her speech, about new techniques used in teaching the blind, was wonderful. I worried about how my speech on the current rash of American assassinations (the year was 1968) would compare. She finished, I stood up, and in my anxiety to take my place behind the lectern, I knocked her down. She was gracious. I was ruined. When she sat down I took a few deep breaths in a vain attempt to regulate everything thumping and pounding throughout my body.

I was about to give the title of my presentation, but instead what came out was "Birth Defects." I had been wondering whether the girl before me had been blind from birth or had had an accident. My audience waited expectantly. I prayed for a trapdoor. There was no place to go. All eyes were on red, shaky, demoralized me. I very skillfully made the transition to my prepared remarks by saying, "Oops, I'm sorry, I mean Assassinations." I was scheduled for remedial courses in voice and diction at the conclusion of the speech.

If only we could be more like cats, who never do anything to shame themselves. Comedian George Carlin does a routine in which he describes a cat running right into the wall, disguising his pain and backing off haughtily as if to say, "I meant to do that." But whether it's gas or something hanging from our nose or toilet paper stuck to our shoe, we humans are going to get found out somewhere along the way. We might find solace in something said by James Russell Lowell: "Whatever you may be sure of, be sure of this—that you are dreadfully like other people." And next time it'll be their turn. □

Marcia Byalick is associate editor of The Women's Record, *a Long Island, New York, newspaper. She writes frequently on humorous topics.*

GENERATIONS

You Say Beauty. I Say Duty.

By MARCIA BYALICK

COCO MASUDA

FOR my 59th birthday, my husband gave me a certificate for a "day of beauty," entitling me to an age-intervention facial, a brow wax, a salt glow and a paraffin body wrap. In April, it will celebrate its third year residing under my nightgowns at the bottom of my drawer.

I don't want to appear ungrateful — most women I know would love a day at the local spa — but I've always felt that a gift that plucks and polishes the body is more a gift for the beholder than for me.

To this day, the man who knows me best, who has slept next to me for four decades, still doesn't understand that he and I have different definitions of "pampering." Whenever I tell him that I am running out for a manicure or getting my hair colored, he's pleased, somehow envisioning that I'm treating myself. He sees time spent during these services as oases of calm, a me-time reward for doing battle with the stresses of life.

"Go enjoy," he smiles as I race out of the house, always 5 minutes late, in time to wait 15 minutes to be taken. "Turn off your phone, close your eyes and relax."

But I've never figured out how to do that. I can think of a dozen things I'd rather do than wait for that last coat to dry. And yet here in the well-manicured suburbs of Long Island, I've come to feel that a regular trip to the nail salon is as essential to passing muster as mowing the front lawn.

My mother died 20 years ago, at 62, never having had her nails polished by anyone but herself. Technology and old photo albums aside, I can mark how much the world has changed by the fact that despite the ailing economy, almost every woman I know still includes a manicure as part of her maintenance regimen. Just like cosmetics, whose sales have jumped 40 percent in the last few months, regular manicures can be a cost-effective way to boost morale and feel better in tough times.

For most of my childhood, my grandmother lived downstairs from us in a two-family house in Brooklyn. She owned one lipstick and a jar of Pond's moisturizer. Each night before bed she spent five minutes creating a dozen perfect pin curls fastened with decade-old black bobby pins. When she died at 88, her face was remarkably unlined (after all, there were not a lot of sun-damaged grandmas around in those days) and her virgin eyebrows astoundingly well shaped.

Upstairs, my mother applied Oil of Olay to her neck and face each morning, and Clairol No. 43, Sun Bronze, to her head every fourth Friday night. She walked around with a frozen helmet of red hair that she rarely washed between standing Saturday-morning appointments at the beauty parlor. I never remember her tweezing her eyebrows, shaving her legs, putting on perfume or removing hair from her upper lip.

"Where am I going and who am I going to impress?" I remember her saying as she eyed the women in the neighborhood who spent more than three minutes getting ready to face the day. She applied whatever eye shadow or lipstick she wore without benefit of a makeup mirror. Yet she always looked pretty well groomed to me.

For my 30th birthday, my sister-in-law, the arbiter of taste and style in the family, gave me a gift certificate for a leg wax. "No offense," her card said, "but it's time . . . "

Maybe the fact that the whole procedure bordered on painful made it almost necessary for me to believe that having someone rip the hair off my thighs and calves with hot wax actually made me feel prettier, healthier and definitely more desirable.

Gradually, I learned how to shampoo the gray out, wrap my nails with tea bags and give myself monthly pedicures. It was as if all of a sudden I was wearing a stronger pair of glasses. I noticed the difference between those women who invested time in maintaining their body parts and those who didn't. A decade later, the waxing extended to my upper lip and my eyebrows. Before long, each task was performed by a professional.

I came late to the party for my generation, starting regularly scheduled professional nail care well into my 40s, beginning what would morph into a time-consuming hamster wheel of self-improvement. My daughters began visiting the nail salon on special occasions as teenagers, then pretty much weekly once they entered the work force in their 20s.

"You just find yourself having to do maintenance on a weekly

> There was a time when it took three minutes to get ready.

basis," remembers my daughter Carrie, now a celebrity publicist. "I never thought I would be that girl who had to get a manicure every week, but I just have to. You feel gross if you don't."

Despite their starting an upkeep regimen at a much younger age than I did, by today's standard they, too, were late bloomers. Local Pennysavers now run ads for hair, makeup and manicure birthday parties for single-digit elementary school girls — some sponsored by the neighborhood Y.

Today's little girl is part of a generation cursed by a precocious hyper-awareness of the necessity of upkeep. The much longer list of mandatory body parts she has grown to believe need grooming seems oppressive.

"I see girls who have a dozen bar mitzvahs to attend in a year and have their hair blown out for each one," said my daughter Jennifer, a middle school psychologist. "Lunchtime conversations include discussions of their late teen idol's threaded eyebrows, lipo-ed legs and collagen-infused lips."

Adolescence is already notorious as a time of fragile egos, so how can any teenage girl feel pretty when the bar for perfection has been raised to such heights?

"When a girl feels that she's perfectly groomed and dressed she can forget that part of her," Scott Fitzgerald wrote in "Bernice Bobs Her Hair." "That's charm. The more parts of yourself you can afford to forget the more charm you have."

I worry about how hard it's going to be for Hannah, my 3-year-old granddaughter, to feel charming.

How to Juggle Work...Home... Marriage...and Family ...Successfully

Linda Saslow
Marcia Byalick

Even the most loving and well-intentioned working couples can run into trouble trying to balance work with responsibilities toward each other...and their children. *Here are strategies to help couples juggle careers and family...*

• Create a 50-50 partnership. To ensure that healthy families flourish in marriages where both spouses work, the family unit must be headed by a strong and equitable partnership.

But sometimes, couples have difficulty negotiating an equitable relationship that works smoothly. Part of the problem is traditional ideas about male and female roles that no longer make sense and often create conflict when couples cannot live up to the old rules. Much of the problem is simply miscommunication and lack of organization.

Solution: Make a complete list of all the jobs that need to be done around the house and the estimated time each one takes. Divide them as equally as possible between yourselves and, when appropriate, your children, keeping in mind each person's strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes.

Trying to have it all is a fine strategy—provided you realize you can't have it all at once

If children are old enough, include them in all or part of the actual discussion. This will teach them important lessons about marriage, negotiation, delegation and responsibility.

• Reevaluate expectations. Too often we expect to have those things our parents had—flower gardens...cloth napkins...crystal place settings...perfectly dressed children. When we can't meet these 1960s expectations, we feel as if we've failed—even though today such standards are unrealistic.

Striving to "have it all" is still a good strategy, provided you realize that it can't "all" necessarily be at the same time.

Helpful: As partners, regularly reevaluate your expectations to find the areas that need more of your attention, and work together to find shortcuts in other areas.

Examples: If your children are going to participate in household chores, be willing to accept lumpy beds and dinner tables set backward. And...if you've had a particularly demanding day at work, substitute pizza for a home-cooked dinner.

• Have crisis plans in place. Nothing upsets the "three-career" juggling act more than unexpected crises—your child wakes up with a fever...your baby-sitter cancels because of an emergency...your mother hurts her back and needs your help.

The best defense is a plan of action—one that's ready before you need it. Come up with contingency plans for every foreseeable circumstance. Write them out and post them where you can find them in a hurry. Knowing what to do will ease your mind and reduce the impact of crises as they occur.

• Know your anger-triggers. Let's face it—we're a society brimming with ambition and stress. It's a lethal combination that turns average stress into overload and anger, exposing us at our most unlovable and rendering us unproductive.

Better: Identify your own personal stress buttons, realizing that a situation that causes one person to go over the edge may be energizing to another. Oral presentations at work, children's birthday parties and wallpapering the bedroom are examples of either opportunities or dreaded events, depending on your perspective.

Even such small things as someone talking during your favorite television show or leaving the top off the ketchup bottle may be potential dynamite.

Once you've each identified your own triggers, share them, respecting your differences. Then work together to avoid those triggers and keep stress down.

Added bonus: Sharing and being supportive of each other's personal quirks will bring greater intimacy to your marriage.

• Manage time efficiently. Too many of us are disorganized and live life on the edge. The result—an awful feeling of running as fast as you can but never catching up, a vicious cycle that costs valuable time.

The most effective way to break this cycle is to sit down each day and make lists. *Here are six strategies for making much better lists...*

☐ **Make new lists at the end of every day.** You can add today's leftovers if there are any.

☐ **Try to limit lists to about six items.** We know sometimes that might be impossible, but it's important to be realistic. The purpose of doing this is to organize a more successful you, not to set yourself up for failure and frustration.

☐ **Rank the items in order of importance.** You must get to the dentist...but you don't have to fold the laundry.

☐ **Complete the tasks in the ranked order,** except for those that are time-related.

☐ **Allow yourself a time cushion between entries.** Don't overschedule.

☐ **Include fun items,** so that the list is not all drudgery.

• Create romance. When you met your spouse, you got and gave equal measures of generosity, respect, encouragement and passion. Then marriage came along and structured the demands of your relationship.

When the pressures of parenthood were added to the equation, your courtship became a mere memory and the only pleasure shared equally was a 10 p.m. bedtime.

Romance is a state of mind. Complaints of not enough time and not enough money are lame excuses.

Agree on a plan *now* in case the sitter cancels

Helpful: Create romance by scheduling time alone at home as well as planning getaways. Stay connected throughout the day via the telephone, fax machine, love notes—anything to let your partner know you're thinking about him/her. Keep in mind that it's often the smallest actions, the most fleeting moments, the silliest gestures, that help keep love alive. $

Promotion Power

Increase your chance of a promotion by accepting lateral moves to gain additional experience...making yourself and your accomplishments highly visible...giving credit to others.

And—by being willing to take on tough assignments...maintaining a positive outlook...staying flexible in your thinking...discussing your career goals with your boss.

The Workplace Survival Guide by George Fuller, contract negotiation consultant (Prentice Hall, $14.95).

Moneysworth interviewed Linda Saslow and Marcia Byalick, New York journalists who pride themselves on being mothers and partners in dual-career marriages. Together, they wrote *The Three Career Couple: Mastering the Fine Art of Juggling Work, Home and Family* (Peterson's, $12.95).

Your job has been outsourced; have a nice day

BY MARCIA BYALICK

I was just fired. From two different jobs. In one week. Neither of my employers, one a huge multimedia giant, the other one of the largest conglomerates in the world, actually came out and said I was canned. There was no pink slip, no ax or sack or boot.

There wasn't even an "I don't think this is working out." That's because I've never been better at what I do, and the reason I was dismissed had nothing to do with my work.

Growing up, the only people I ever knew who lost their jobs were incompetent, insubordinate, dishonest or drug-abusing. Today, when we hear someone is out of work, we speculate about the moral fiber of the employer.

'Today, when we hear someone is out of work, we speculate about the moral fiber of the employer.'

I heard a horrifying story recently from a stock broker. He told of getting off the elevator one morning with several colleagues and seeing empty cardboard boxes on four desks scattered around the office. One desk belonged to the guy standing next to him. Rather than wait to get called down to Human Resources, be told he was about to be sacrificed in the face of an upcoming corporate merger and asked to leave the building, he turned around and got back on the elevator. After 10 years of working for the firm, he never returned.

One of my freelance jobs, as the content editor of a highly successful Web site, was outsourced to India; the other, a monthly column, was eliminated by a new boss who was looking for someone more "upbeat" (or, as the kids would say, younger).

Although I was assured in both cases it wasn't my style or skills that were lacking, my mind now housed a seriously deflated ego.

Along with expressions of outrage at CBS for letting sportscaster Warner Wolf go and NBC for not renewing the contract of Alex Kingston, a 41-year-old actress who played Dr. Elizabeth Corday on "ER" for seven years (ageism in both cases), conversations at the gym where I'm trying to spend my suddenly "spare" time are filled with stories of how mergers and downsizing and outsourcing are destroying any concept of job security.

FILE PHOTO, 1992

Warner Wolf got axed, too.

Although downsizing, outsourcing and restructuring sound innocuous and innocent, they are 2004's euphemisms for "you're fired." While intellectually I understand these theories lead to higher productivity and smarter use of capitalization and labor, their collateral damage is devastating.

Unemployment is said to cause more long-term psychological trauma than losing a loved one, with less chance of getting back to prior levels of happiness.

I used to be cocky enough to think as long as I continued to do my best, to be passionate, curious and informed, my paycheck was secure. I had years of experience polishing and practicing and enjoying my occupation.

So did the neighboring school superintendent and my friend, a local college basketball coach. We were all at the top of our game. In the words of Peter Sellers as Inspector Clouseau in the "Pink Panther" movies, "Not any more."

Marcia Byalick lives in Albertson.

Belatedly learning to take golf to the fore

BY MARCIA BYALICK

For years I railed against golfers and their sport, hating the clubbiness, the clothes, the initial investment in time, lessons and equipment needed before you can tell if this hardest of all games suits your temperament.

That, added to the suspicion that 75 percent of the players on the PGA Tour never voted for a Democrat, fueled my animosity. I hated a sport where people pay gardeners to sign up for them early in the morning, where you can be reprimanded if you jump ahead or go the wrong way, where you have to learn a million unnatural-feeling details in a fishbowl.

Yet, I can no longer ignore that 50 million people in the world play golf, 22 percent of them women. I discovered anyone could play. A look at the love-handled John Daly and Craig Stadleris proof enough athletes come in all shapes and sizes. A 101-year- old recently shot a hole in one.

'I see one of the last places where manners and rules and good behavior still reign.'

A newspaper article showed pictures of people with Alzheimer's still enjoying the game. Could feelings of intimidation rather than cold facts have bolstered my opinion?

I admit that golf refutes a world with too little civility. When I see golfers from teenaged beginners to the most powerful of men replacing divots and repairing ball marks, I see one of the last places where manners and rules and good behavior still reign.

Grudgingly I began to admire an avocation that makes losers out of the best who play. Golf is a game of misses, and the winners are those who have the best misses. With perfection out of reach, golfers have to make a commitment to never stop learning, to live with the fact they will never conquer the game.

Forty of the top-50 tour pros work with sports psychologists. Not only did that belie their nerves-of-steel exterior; it reinforced my feeling that people who play golf are involved in a love-hate relationship more complex and confusing than the battle between the sexes.

In an athletic event where the difference between an ordinary player and a champion is the way they think, where brainpower rules over muscle power, there are no shortcuts.

AP PHOTO

John Daly shows his stuff.

Concentration and discipline are king. As someone whose choice of exercise is a challenging workout on a stationary bike, my guru is Lance Armstrong. It was eye-opening for me to note that he preaches many of the same lessons.

A number of my heroes, from Franklin D. Roosevelt (before polio) to Bill Murray, have stripped their souls naked on the golf course. It is the only sport I can think of you can do as a child, play as an adult and continue to enjoy with your grandchildren.

The thousands expected to attend the U.S. Open at Shinnecock next month already know that. From what I've heard, it's a difficult course to walk. Not that such an obstacle will stop them. They know all things are possible. They play golf.

Marcia Byalick lives in Searingtown.