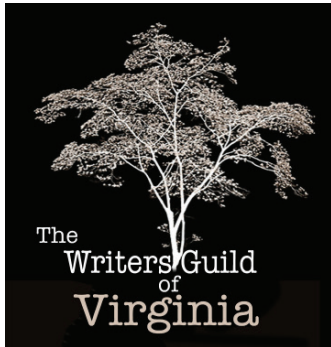




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Subtraction not Addition

Throughout our lives, most of us have been conditioned to value addition instead of subtraction. Even the subliminal aspects of mathematical symbols color our opinion. In grade school we get a plus sign or a smiley face on our exemplary work and a minus sign or sad face for poor work. Electrical energy in a circuit is both positive (supply) and negative (return), much like a battery's poles. Psychology says a positive effect relates to a person's propensity to approach life optimistically and a negative effect refers to a pessimistic outlook. Banking refers to a positive balance (I have money in my account) or a negative balance (I owe money). We've been taught that positive means success and minus means failure.

While this theory may hold true for social status or professional growth, it does not necessarily apply to spiritual development. Is it possible that adding more knowledge from spiritual authorities can even obscure Divine knowledge and hinder growth? Many noted spiritual leaders buttress this fact. In the thirteenth century, Meister Eckhart said, "God is not attained by a process of addition to anything in the soul, but by a process of subtraction¹." Antisthenes, a Greek philosopher in 444 BC said, "The most useful piece of learning for the uses of life is to unlearn what is untrue." Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest who currently runs the Center for Action and Contemplation says, "Jesus' spirituality is much more about letting go of what we do not need anyway. It more often involves unlearning than learning."²

In explaining the title of his book *From Onions to Pearls*, Satyam Nadeen refers to the process of unlearning as awakening. "So what



awakening consists of is the realization that you are indeed this perfect Pearl of Consciousness; and then the deliverance takes over by removing each subtle layer of conditioning until only the Pearl again remains." Ram Dass' book, *Polishing the Mirror*, also talks about awakening. He says that it can happen when we polish the mirror daily and see our true nature beyond the illusion of our thoughts and emotions. He defines polishing the mirror as getting rid of our misconceptions.

Unlearning applies to societal norms as well as spiritual ideology. Even the modern social warrior, Gloria Steinem addressed this issue, "The first problem for all of us, men and women, is not to learn, but to unlearn." Take White privilege for a contemporary example of social learning that requires unlearning. *The Christian Century* magazine reminds us that "One of the unspoken

privileges of being White in America is to assume that racism is not a pressing topic." The article goes on to say, "According to Jesus, relinquishment is a ticket to abundant life."³ Along that same line, heterosexuals are having to learn something new about
³ Anthony Robinson, *The Christian Century*, July 9, 2020.

1 Matthew Fox, *Meister Eckhart: A Mystic Warrior for Our Times*, New World Library, 2014.

2 CAC *Daily Meditations, True Self and False Self: Week 1, Who Am I?*, Sunday, August 6, 2017.

pronouns which requires unlearning that there is only “he” and “she” in referring to gender identity. In all cases, it seems that letting go, unlearning, discarding, conditioning and, many times, changing your mind (the real translation for the word, repent) are essential for growth. We have worked hard all our lives for our beliefs, but holding fast to beliefs instead of challenging them can become an obstacle to personal, social, and spiritual growth.

Even those of us who have embarked on a journey toward spiritual enlightenment encounter obstacles. We crowd so much into our lives, filling every waking minute with activity and tasks. All these thoughts and decisions are within our immediate mental grasp at any one time. An old saying derived from the Bible paraphrases this condition, “There is no room at the inn.” While it refers to the inn in Bethlehem where Joseph and Mary sought shelter, it has a psychological meaning, as well. Our minds are so crowded that no creative thought or Divine inspiration can wiggle its way in. Old sages often comment on a shiver running up someone’s spine, calling it the “spirit trying to sneak in.” because there’s no room in the mind.

Since we have so many decisions to process mentally, we may resort to snap judgments based on past experiences of similar (but not exact) circumstances. Then we are in danger of letting conditioning make our decisions. We tell ourselves we can handle it all. We base these decisions on our belief system which may be faulty, leading to more poor decisions. As Mahatma Gandhi so eloquently put it:

“Your beliefs become your thoughts,
Your thoughts become your words,
Your words become your actions,
Your actions become your habits,
Your habits become your values,
Your values become your destiny.”⁴

I think Gandhi was cautioning us to chart our destinies from our current position and not from the anchor of some belief, thought, or action accumulated from the past. To do that, we must engage on a path to unload a lot of information from our

banks of knowledge.

Jiddah Krishnamurti taught that we are consumed by conditioning. We are trained by all sorts of influences that we have been fed since childbirth. Our parents, teachers, police officers, religious figures, peers, and general media influence our view of reality based on standards of behavior taught by so-called authorities. Big business and advertising tell us that we’re not good enough unless we purchase these sunglasses, or wear that designer clothing. We are conditioned to accept our inadequacies in order to satisfy the objectives of another.

This is not to say we should unplug the TV and internet. We don’t have to become hermits, or forsake all conveniences and pleasures like deodorant, hot showers, fresh linens and movies. It doesn’t mean we should forgo education. It doesn’t mean to forsake religion and avoid spiritual practice. In many ways, a new spiritual path will not change our daily lives in the least.

My spiritual mentor once gave me a challenge: “For a year or so, write down every decision you make on a daily basis, and, at the end of the day, analyze your decisions. Ask yourself why you selected those decisions from the myriad options. What influenced your choices? From where does the rationale arise? How much of your decision-making is original? How much comes from being told, somewhere along the line, that this decision is most appropriate? You may end up with the same decision after you think it through and understand the source. The difference is you will be aware of what you are doing and understand why you are doing it.” I followed his advice and found that this practice of subtracting long-held, but faulty beliefs has helped me to live more purposefully and authentically.

⁴ From a speech referenced in multiple sources, including AZ Quotes and https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/5810891.Mahatma_Gandhi

Autumn Maze

In this season of darkening days and stalking scarecrows,
I long to step inside Lewis' wardrobe,
pushing aside fur coats of fears and boots that root me
to this trembling earth,
to see the colors change.

Friends fighting for health
with valiant purple courage,
the lonely watching russet leaves fall
seeing bare branches of opportunity,
children running through a corn maze
finding their way to the prize,

For Aslan, the awesome lion of Narnia,
who sees all, holds us securely in "velvet paws."

The Red Leather Sofa

The drive to Alexandria seemed longer than usual that day. Memories filled my mind, and I was overcome by grief. Earlier that morning I was unable to reach my friend Nancy. Finally, because it was unusual for her to not call me daily, I contacted the Alexandria Police and asked for a wellness check. Fifteen minutes later, they called to say my friend of thirty-two years was dead.

My first concern was to make sure her dog was safe. Greer was less than two years old and totally bonded to Nancy. She had given Greer what every dog needs—lots of love, established boundaries, continuous professional training, daycare for socialization, and get-aways to Aunt Gwen's, where she discovered freedom from leashes and opportunities to play with my four dogs.

She listened carefully, and I could tell she was not afraid to face the future. Now, each time I walk through the front door of Nancy's house, I look at the sofa and the memories pass through my mind like a video. That sofa is where, over the years, each of Nancy's dogs sat with her. Every day when we spoke, Nancy would share stories about Greer. Anyone listening to the conversation would have thought Nancy was



Greer was found lying next to her owner's body. That first night in Alexandria she slept on top of me with her front paws hugging my neck. Greer is very smart and adaptive, so I knew finding her the right home would be the easiest task I faced...and it was. A week later she went home with the perfect couple who appreciated her good manners and affection; and I could stay in contact with her, because her new home would be here in Kilmarnock.

While I was in Alexandria, Greer and I sat together on Nancy's red leather sofa. I gave her belly

a mother talking about her child...and I, the favorite aunt, would laugh with delight.

Before Greer, Nancy adopted Fe, a flat-coated retriever. Fe, the iron lady, worshipped Nancy. Fe had been on the run for a long time before her adoption. She was non-trusting when Nancy got her, with rope burn scars on her stomach and a ruptured eardrum. To say she suffered with separation anxiety would not accurately describe her behavior. Many times she vanished from my house when Nancy was out of town. I stopped counting how many door knobs she destroyed. Perhaps she

was convinced if she could get on the other side of that door, she would find Nancy.

Nancy worked during the day. But when Fe was finally able to relax, it was always on that red leather sofa.

My favorite dog that Nancy adopted was named Crackerjack. I had found the yellow Lab-pit mix at a dog event where he was a puppy up for adoption. I got him for a good friend who was recently widowed and who had also lost her dog. Three years later my friend got sick, and when she died, I brought Crackerjack home to live. When Nancy visited me, she wanted to take Crackerjack back to Alexandria as a companion for her 100-pound black Lab named Tag. I objected to giving up Crackerjack because I had promised my friend I would take care of him. Tag had never met Crackerjack until the weekend he and Nancy came for a visit.

We crated Crackerjack while we went to dinner. When we returned, we were greeted at the door by Tag and Crackerjack. Tag was a brilliant dog who earned the nickname Houdini. He had used his brilliance to unlock the crate. It was evident these two dogs had formed a relationship. So, Nancy said she would put Crackerjack in her car with Tag, and when they left, if Crackerjack looked back, she would stop the car and return him to me.

I stood in the driveway that Sunday morning and watched as they drove away. Crackerjack never looked back. For many years, these two dogs were together as companions for Nancy and each other. Yes, every night they sat on the red leather sofa like bookends hoping Nancy would offer them something from her dinner plate. They seemed to have an agreement. Tag was the inside protector and Crackerjack became the outside protector, allowing Tag to be carefree during their walks.

A few years later, Tag passed away. Crackerjack and Nancy were devastated. Later Nancy decided Crackerjack needed a buddy. And that is when Fe came into their lives. But Fe was not a good match for Crackerjack. He tried to voice his objection, but Nancy did not hear what Crackerjack was saying. Ready to take Fe to her new home, she had placed a crate on the floor of her van. But when Fe got into the van, Crackerjack was sitting in the crate with the door closed, and Fe immediately jumped up on the seat; and so a new relationship began. Crackerjack objected to Fe's bossiness, but as the years passed, in spite of their differences, the rela-

tionship grew. When Crackerjack died, Nancy was heartbroken and didn't realize how much Fe missed him too. Nancy and Fe struggled to adjust. Again, the red sofa provided seating for two.

After several years of just the two of them living together, Nancy accepted a chocolate Lab puppy from friends in Washington State that she named Greer. This was not a happy change for Fe. Like a grumpy old woman, Fe did not adapt well to the puppy's high energy level and constant desire to play, nor did she appreciate having to share Nancy with Greer. But the red sofa provided seating for three.

A few months after Greer's arrival, Fe passed away. The sofa had always been there for Tag, Crackerjack, Fe, Greer and Nancy. Now the red leather sofa once again served only two, Nancy and Greer.

Without warning, Nancy died. Greer moved to her new home and was given her new name, Rey. The sofa that had provided so much comfort to Nancy and her dogs over the years is empty. I'm searching for someone to adopt the red leather sofa. It, too, needs a new life, a new beginning.

The Guesser

The weather had taken a change the past week
with shorter, cooler days; more noticeable now
with the nearness of season's end
at the Palace Playland in Old Orchard Beach, Maine.
Fewer visitors were spending less time at the booths
along the boardwalk, the Guesser's included.

Soon they would all close; the rides ceasing to spin.
The owners and workers departing to milder climes
or being forced to live on their decreasing summer earnings.
Dave "the Guesser" Glovsky had worked his booth
for over forty years, guessing customers' ages,
weights, occupations, brands of cigarettes.

The short man with a big smile, dark frame glasses
wore a white T-shirt advertising his trade,
Dave "the Guesser" in bold black lettering.
Dave, a former boxer, had married Blanche
when he was twenty-two and had been guessing
since the late '40s.

Sherlock Holmes observant, Dave amassed
an encyclopedia of details by noticing things.
He guessed people's ages by judging
the smoothness of skin, the veins on backs of hands;
their occupations from calluses or lack of,
ink on shirts, cuts and burns on hands.

The Guesser did not rely on trickery
or rigged scales. He charged twenty-five cents
a guess, and if he guessed wrong, well,
you won a small prize: a package of colored rubber bands
or a plastic hair ornament. After all, the fun was
in trying to fool the funny little man with his puppet.

Dave smiled as he remembered trying to guess Satchmo's weight.
"Oh well," he said to himself. "Better get on with it."
He unhung the large sign above his booth:
OLD ORCHARD BEACH, Guess station, Fill up with Fun.
"Fall is in the air, and the tourists are fading,"
Dave sighed, "and so it is with me."

Cindy L. Freeman

School Days

I longed to go to school like my sister instead of staring out the window as Marion boarded the bus. Yet, I feared leaving the protected world my mother had fashioned for her timid second child who suffered from severe eczema and multiple allergies.

I could only fantasize about riding in the giant yellow contraption--how the seats felt, how it smelled, and whether I'd be tall enough to see out the windows. Beyond the bus ride, my imagination created a classroom with rows of desks and a blackboard, a space where I was smart and confident, with a teacher who agreed.

Each morning, as Marion managed the bus's steep steps and disappeared for the day, I could scarcely wait until I was old enough to carry books and a lunchbox and be assigned homework. But, in 1953, I had to wait another whole year. I would need to devise my own entertainment since Mom, a dairy farmer's wife, was busy with housework, gardening, canning, sewing, cooking, and caring for my two-year-old brother, Rodger.

Some mornings after the bus pulled away, I played school. Of course, I was the self-appointed teacher. Rodger didn't follow directions well, so the dolls that I lined up on the living room sofa served as my pupils. My favorite student was Darlene. She had long, shiny brunette hair that I brushed and styled and brushed some more, adding colorful ribbons leftover from Mom's sewing projects: red to match one dress or blue to match another. Mom kept my hair cut in a pageboy with short bangs, contributing to my obsession with long, flowing locks. Short hair was easier for her to maintain and less prone to irritate my "eczemic," oozing skin. It was this fixation with long tresses that compelled me to brush Darlene's hair until most of it fell out. But even bald Darlene was special because I could make her walk. As I pumped her arms back and

forth, her stiff legs moved in response. Hip joints allowed her to sit, but lacking knee joints, she never learned to sit properly. No matter. She was a good listener.

My Betsy Wetsy doll resembled a miniature baby. She had arrived on my fourth birthday, along with a cardboard suitcase filled with extra clothes and a supply of tiny cloth diapers, everything a young mother needed to care for her infant. Whenever I fed her water from a little plastic bottle, she would wet her diaper. Like most mothers, I grew tired of changing her, but instead of engaging in potty-training, I simply stopped feeding her. Problem solved.

Completing my classroom line-up was my beloved bedtime companion: a nameless, stuffed elephant covered in red, polka-dotted vinyl. My allergies prevented me from having furry pets, whether real or stuffed.

I would "read" to my pupils, and they adored me, following my instructions without hesitation or complaint. Whenever I played school with Marion, she seldom allowed me to be the teacher, and I didn't like being my sister's pupil. She grew impatient with me for not comprehending her first-grade curriculum and teased me for holding books upside down when I read. I would storm away from her classroom in a huff, accusing her of being a mean teacher.



Finally, by the next September, I was old enough to ride the school bus; but such a brief trip scarcely allowed me to settle before reaching my destination. You see, the distance from my family's farmhouse at the top of the hill to my elementary school at the bottom was less than half a mile.

On my first day of kindergarten, Marion and I waited at the end of the driveway for the bus to round the bend in front of Grandpa's farm, which abutted our property. As soon as I spotted it, I wanted to turn and run back to the house. My stomach flip-flopped in anticipation of the unknown adventure awaiting me. In those days, there was no kindergarten orientation to prepare an anxious child for her first day of school.

My mother stood on the front porch smiling and waving as she held Rodger on her hip. I had no way of knowing she was pregnant with my youngest brother who joined our family the following February. Mom called to me, "It's okay. You'll be fine," but the worry in her eyes failed to bolster my confidence. "Marion, hold your sister's hand and help her up the steps."

"Well, good morning, ladies," Mr. Baldwin called. "How are we today?" He lifted a hand to my mother before pulling a lever that closed the door to my familiar world. I avoided eye-contact with the other children as Marion walked me halfway back, pushing from behind, and found an empty seat for us. I was sure the other children must be experienced bus riders who could sense my discomfort. With considerable effort, I clamored onto the green vinyl bench and sat back, but my legs didn't reach the floor. Instead, they stuck out straight like Bald Darlene's, as if my knees had no joints. There was nothing to prevent me from being tossed about. Scooting forward, I grabbed the metal bar in front of me, slipped to the floor, and firmly planted my new Mary Janes. With legs apart and arms locked, I prepared for the bus to jerk into gear and propel me forward. I was too distracted by anxious thoughts to look out the window and wave to my mother.

Within minutes, I discovered that riding a school bus was not the thrill I had expected. It smelled like grease, bounced up and down like Dad's tractor, and made my stomach queasy.



When the bus stopped at our driveway, brakes hissing, I realized there was no escape. Tears tried to well in my eyes, but I swallowed hard and pretended to be brave. The tall hinged door squeaked open, revealing the kind eyes of Mr. Baldwin, a rotund man whose girth spilled over the edge of the driver's seat. Sighing, Marion took my hand and helped me scale the precipitous steps. I carried a shiny new Mighty Mouse lunch box and wore a navy blue and white, polka-dot dress that Mom had made for my first day of school. For once, she had not dressed us like twins.

"Sit up here, silly," Marion instructed, patting the seat. I jumped up and grabbed the edge, but no sooner had I settled than we were down the hill, arriving at our destination. To that point in my young life, Palermo Elementary had been my sister's school. Suddenly I realized I wasn't ready for it to be my school. Many concerns overshadowed my excitement about starting school. I worried the teacher wouldn't let me go to the restroom when I needed to. I worried I wouldn't have any friends. What if no one wanted to sit next to me because

of the rash on my hands, arms and legs? What if they laughed at me? What if I wasn't smart enough for kindergarten? What if I boarded the wrong bus when it was time to go home?

Despite my apprehension, kindergarten was fun, and the teacher, Mrs. McNett, was nice. Even when she corrected her students, she spoke with a kind voice. In those days, teachers wore dresses to school. Mrs. McNett's dresses were dark, usually brown or black, and plain. Her wire-rimmed glasses, chunky shoes, and hairnet contributed to my perception that she was old...at least thirty.

Kindergarten introduced me to myriad interesting activities, but art and music were my favorites. An inviting easel stood before the row of windows along one side of the classroom. Each day at center time, I hurried to the easel, determined to possess one of its panels. Beside it was a tray laden with generous containers of Tempera paint in brilliant primary colors. On the other side, Mrs. McNett had spread a table with crayons and paper, but they wouldn't suffice for this budding artist. Drawing with broken or otherwise gnarled crayons could not compare to swirling luscious paint across an over-sized sheet of clean newsprint.

Since blue was my favorite color, my landscapes started with an expanse of azure sky, dotted with a few cottony clouds. Sometimes I would add a house and a barn, but mostly I painted grassy hills and pastures adorned with trees and colorful flowers. It took only a few trips to the easel before I uncovered the magic of mixing primary colors with a dab of white or black.

It's a well-known fact that artists do not appreciate being rushed or interrupted. I was no exception. To get the tints and hues just right required time to study the view beyond my classroom's windows. There, in spring and fall, trees and flowers graced the adjoining cemetery; and in winter, deep snow covered the tombstones with fluffy cotton. I suppose Mrs. McNett thought I was daydreaming because she would remind me to finish up. "Others are waiting for a turn at the easel," she would say. Frustration would set in if center time ended before I finished my masterpiece, but I didn't complain. At five years old, I was too timid to express my feelings openly.

For music time, we gathered on a large oval rag-rug near the upright piano. Mrs. McNett played the piano and led us in songs with rhyming words and

hand motions. At times, she placed round black discs on the turntable for lively tunes to accompany our dances and circle games like "The Farmer in the Dell" or "Ring Around a Rosy." Other times, we tapped the blue Lummi sticks or metal triangles in time with the beat.

For me, the best part of music time was singing. Often Mrs. McNett would call on me to demonstrate. Normally when called upon, I felt shy, wishing I could melt into the carpet, but not during music time. Singing dissipated every ounce of self-consciousness. Singing made me feel light, free, and strangely confident. At the time, I didn't know music would one day be my career, that I would become a singer, music teacher, and choral conductor. In kindergarten, all I knew was that singing brought me joy and much-needed positive attention.

I relished singing so much that sometimes I sang when I wasn't supposed to. I would never misbehave intentionally at school, at least not that year. I would have been mortified to incur the teacher's disapproval. But one day during nap time, I began to hum...not a recognizable tune, just some obscure melody from inside my head, where many obscure melodies lived. As I rested on my pale-green bath towel, I didn't realize I had been humming aloud. Soon, I sensed a shadow hovering above me. Daring to open one eye, I spotted Mrs. McNett staring downward. Although she was never harsh, at that moment, she looked rather imposing.

"Lucinda," she said, using my given name. It was the name my mother used whenever she scolded me. Whispering like a toddler in church, she continued, "Please stop humming. You'll wake the others." My face grew hot. I was sure I would be punished. I had no way of knowing that Mrs. McNett never disciplined with shame or blame. Many years later, when I became a teacher, I recognized that, whether through instinct or education, my first teacher was committed to giving her young students a positive start in school through gentle training.

As far as I know, my parents never learned of my humming transgression, nor was there a consequence associated with what I expected to be a punishable offense. Eventually, I adapted to riding the bus, and I continued to love art and music, especially singing. But I never hummed again during kindergarten nap time.



6 Feet

Terry Cox-Joseph

Safer, to be apart
in all things—love, death.
Step back. Distance persists

with intent to save heart
or breath, new distance to exist.
Special-order masks resist

stray spittle belittled by charts
and graphs in daily news, death
and weave of cellular twist.

We share fear, unified parts—
new distance to exist.
Crushed in clench of fist,

virus blows sterile kiss
at grocery mart. I plan to scrub
all—love, death. Down a vitamin,

order online, persist
in withdrawal. Witness this
new distance to exist
in all things—love, death.

Bookworm

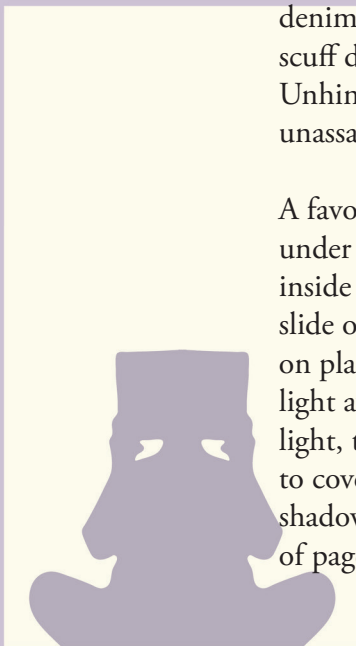


A favorite place
under the dormer
inside the dormer,
triangle of unfinished
pine. Withhold sneeze,
exhale wood dust.
Inside, darkness.
Studs, nail tips,
solitude. Escape
from prying eyes,
endless criticism.

Terry Cox-Joseph



A favorite darkness
under the dormer,
inside the dormer,
twelve stairs, bare,
railing raw, alcove
sized to crawl into,
denimed knees
scuff dust.
Unhindered,
unassailable.



A favorite light
under the dormer
inside the dormer
slide of thumb
on plastic, hand-held
light away from
light, to own,
to covet. Soft,
shadowed turn
of pages sates.



Meep

I stared at the Mac screen on my desk. It had been nine hours since I had gotten up, fixed my morning tea, and sat down to write. It was a little after 1:00 PM on a Saturday, and I was getting hungry. The idea of fixing lunch was unappealing, so I rummaged through the refrigerator, hoping to find a leftover that hadn't turned to penicillin. Nothing looked inviting.

The deadline for my article was looming, and wasting time was not an option. I decided to drive to the market and pick up something. Something fast and appropriate because I had managed to gain twenty-five pounds since the start of COVID-19. I blamed my binge eating on the isolation, but I'm a writer, and we like inaccessibility, especially when our editor is trying to hunt us down. Now, I had to deal with the twenty-five pounds, so fried chicken and potato salad (staples at the market) were off limits.

It's only a mile to the grocery store, and sometimes I walk down the winding road to the small strip mall that houses the store. I live in the country, on the Chesapeake Bay of Virginia. We have no sidewalks, so you have to be careful and ready to leap into the cornfield if a driver doesn't see you walking along the road.

I decided I didn't have the time for a leisurely stroll to the market, so I hopped in my car and took off for the short drive. When I got to the stop sign that marks the end of the lane and began the left turn down Providence Road, I noticed two boys playing catch with an orange, furry ball. They were the grandsons of the woman who lived in the woods at the end of the driveway directly across from the stop sign. Mrs. Rayleen Douglas was a CNA (certified nursing assistant) at the local nursing home and was a hard-working, dedicated woman who was raising the two boys. She worked the 7 AM to 3 PM shift so she could be home after school. The boys caught the school bus at 6:40 AM which meant they didn't have a lot of unsupervised time.

Devine and Leonard were seven and nine and lived in the house with an assortment of dogs and cats. "After my kids were grown and out, I thought I'd have some 'me time,' she had said. "But the

mother of those boys ran off with a truck driver, and their daddy is in jail for possession of marijuana. They had no one else, and I was not letting the foster system take them. So, they're here with me now. My neighbor watches them when I have to work on a Saturday for overtime pay. They're good boys, but they're boys."

I glanced over at the boys while I was sitting at the stop sign. They were standing close together, tossing the orange furry ball between them. I looked closer and saw the orange ball had legs. It's a cat. A kitten, to be exact. I drove straight across into their driveway. "Devine," I yelled from my open window, "what are you doing to the kitten? And where is Miss Rayleen?"

Even though Leonard was the older one, Devine usually did most of the talking and excuse offering and was usually the instigator. Leonard was quiet, hanging back to see if he needed to talk or run.

"Miss Rayleen's man friend came over this morning, and she said to go outside and stay out until she called us back in," Devine answered.

"What time was that?"

"Right after breakfast," he replied.

I looked at the kitten. It hung from Devine's hands, limp and lifeless. Great. A dead kitten. How do I explain that to the magazine editor waiting for my story?

I got out of the car. Leonard began backing up, but Devine stood his ground. "Don't you want to know why the kitty is wet?" he asked.

"Yes, I want to know that and why you are tossing it around like a baseball."

"Well, last week we went to Vacation Bible

School at MawMaw's church and the teacher had us play games, and do art stuff, and talked to us about getting baptized like Jesus did in the river, and getting saved, and..."

"Devine, that is a great story, but why is the cat wet?"

"Oh. We baptized it. It has to go under the water three times. We used that bucket over there." He pointed to a fish pail under the tree.

The kitten never moved. I didn't move; and neither did the two boys. After a prolonged pause, Leonard squeaked, "Are you gonna tell MawMaw?"

"I don't know, Leonard. Your grandmother deserves to know if you killed a kitten. What do you think I should do?"

"Nothing," they replied in unison.

"And why were you throwing the kitten like that? What were you thinking?"

"We was trying to dry him off. MawMaw said to be clean when we got home, so we didn't want to dry him on our shirts."

I stared at the two boys. I don't know what was more pitiful – the look on their faces or the poor lifeless cat in Devine's hand.

"Okay. Devine and Leonard, here is what I am going to do. I will take the kitty home and bury it. I do have to tell your MawMaw because she is in charge of you and she has to know. I know you think you were doing the right thing, but you hurt the kitty and that was wrong."

"Please don't tell her," Devine begged. "She'll be really mad."

I said nothing, reached for the motionless cat, and went back to the car. "You boys tell Miss Rayleen I said to come in for lunch. And stay in, okay?"

They nodded.

I drove the short distance home, picked up the orange wet mass that was once a live animal, and got a shovel from the garage. I found a small box in the garage and walked down the hill to the spot where we had buried our beloved border collie, Babe. Placing the kitten in the box, I walked over to a place in the animal graveyard and dug a hole deep enough so animals wouldn't find the body

and dig it up.

When I turned around to put the lid on the box, and bury it, the kitten was sitting up and staring at me. He managed a short, high-pitched sound.



I carried the box, shovel, and kitten back to the garage and took the cat inside. I gave him a bath in the kitchen sink. He had fleas, and the vet had told me to use Dawn detergent to wash an animal with bugs. I dried him carefully and took him into the bathroom. We didn't have a litter box or cat food or anything else to comfort the newly baptized orange fuzz ball. I put him in the whirlpool tub with a blanket so Daisy, our English Bulldog, would leave him alone. The grocery store was my next stop.

Back at home with kitty food, a small plastic tray for the litter, and my lunch, I checked on our new boarder. He was sleeping peacefully on the blanket. What a tiny animal. No bigger than my right fist.

On Monday, I took him to our veterinarian. I told him the story about the baptism and drying-off routine. "Did you tell their grandmother," he asked.

"No, not yet."

"Hmmm. Might rethink it. I know Mrs. Rayleen Douglas. She doesn't stand for any nonsense. I think those boys are pretty good most of the time. Maybe a reprieve is in order?"

I shook my head, agreeing with his wise words.

He didn't charge me for the visit.

The unnamed cat and I returned home. I put him in his bathtub corral and went back to work. He was so tiny but was eating and using the cat box. The rest of the time he slept. After three weeks, he could jump to the side of the tub and run around the house. I named him Meep, the definition of his high pitched attempt at a meow.

We had Meep neutered, and he spent many glorious afternoons lying in the sun on the back of a chair in the family room.



Two years after we adopted Meep, we rescued a hound dog that had been released by his hunter

owner. Rescuers say dogs who don't perform are often disposed of so that hunters don't have to feed them. It's called "hound dumping" and is a common and cruel practice where I live in rural Virginia. Each year, hundreds of dogs are found – emaciated, injured or shot. One of the rescue groups in our area had found our Lemon Walker Hound in a ditch, near death. He weighed less than twenty pounds. The rescue group had nursed him back to health, and he was ready for adoption.

Bernie was suspicious and distrustful when he first came to our home. He would run and cower at the sight of a broom, and my husband's deep voice scared him. He was guarded around everyone.

Except Meep.

When we brought Bernie (the hound) home, Meep greeted him by cleaning his head, then his ears and finally lay down next to his back.

For the first month, Meep positioned himself as close to Bernie as possible, always purring and licking his back. Since the first night Bernie arrived, to this day ten years later, the two have slept together on the foot of our bed.

Bernie now weighs forty pounds, Meep is a big cat at seventeen pounds. Oh, and Leonard graduated from high school last year with honors and Devine is graduating next year. Their grandmother is proud of the job she did. When Leonard graduated, he invited me to the party at his house. He was standing next to me when Rayleen said, "I am so proud of you two boys! You have been good boys, never any trouble since you went to Vacation Bible School when you were seven and nine and got baptized. That's all they ever talk about – baptism!"

Leonard smiled and winked at me. Little does she know...



A Love Story

(Narrative Poem)

Home is where the love is.

Sunyei, a newborn orphaned elephant calf, was rescued in the African wilds twenty years ago by the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust.

She bonded with Benjamin, the elephant keeper, who saved her by bottle-feeding her specially fortified milk formula. For ten years, he nurtured her, and taught her basic survival skills.

Eventually, she graduated into a reintegration unit in a conservation area where she could sharpen those skills, learning from other elephants. Elephants there decide when they are ready to leave.

Ten years after Sunyei left to fend for herself, she returned to the Wildlife Trust in Kenya, nuzzling and accepting treats from her old friend, Benjamin. She brought a surprise – a baby of her own.

Since their reunion, Sunyei and her calf have returned several times--all interactions on her own terms--making the bond with the man who raised her even more meaningful.

Forty years ago, wildlife experts thought it impossible to raise a newborn elephant. The Trust's Orphan Program has now rescued and successfully returned 160 elephants to the wild.

Sunyei's desire to introduce her new baby to the humans who raised her, speaks volumes about elephants' intelligence and sense of family. They, too, recognize that home is where the love is.

The Elephants Who Came To Dinner

from **ELEPHANT STORIES**

Mfuwe Lodge in South Luang National Park, Zambia, is spread beneath a magnificent canopy of ebony and mahogany trees. Its thatched buildings are arranged around the banks of two lagoons where an endless stream of wildlife wanders freely. A wild mango tree has lured generations of elephants every November, long before the lodge was built.



The first year Mfuwe opened for business, the elephants made it clear that this betrayal of their space would not change their route or intentions. They walked into the open-air lobby with no warning, shuffled through and out into the courtyard to feast on the mangoes. Don't you wish you could have seen the look on the face of the reception desk clerk that day? Every year since, the elephants' sojourn to the mango tree draws crowds of tourists to the lodge. The elephants ignore them, intent on only one thing – eating mangoes. When the mangoes are gone, so are the elephants, parading back through the lobby and into the wilderness.

According to the lodge owners, the group that makes the annual stroll through the lobby represents several generations of one elephant family – including their matriarch, “Wonky Tusk,” and the youngest addition, “Lord Wellington,” who was a baby when he made his first lobby march. Baby elephants are incredibly protected by their female family. Imagine the trust level that elephant mom demonstrated, bringing her child into a building inhabited by humans. Who knew mangoes were that enticing!

COVID's Long Tentacles

(Narrative Poem)

Adroa leaves his bed and family home long
before morning sun touches the rooftop.
He and a friend hike two miles beyond
their Ugandan village to the limestone mine.

All day, Adroa wields a heavy mallet, breaking
large chunks of limestone into small pieces that
are loaded into massive trucks and whisked
away to busy cement plants in bustling cities.

Work day ends at dusk. Adroa makes the long
trek home with enough money in his ragged
jeans to buy flour and salt for tortillas that will
feed his extended family of eight for another day.

Adroa, whose name means, God's Will, is barely
thirteen years old. Before the pandemic attacked
his village, he was a top student at the local school,
dreaming of graduation and going away to college.

His father was one of the first to become ill. He
survived but was left weakened, unable to work.
As the oldest child, support of the family fell to
Adroa. Many school friends suffered similar fates.

President Biden recently announced the United
States will donate millions of COVID vaccine doses
to under-served countries. They will save lives and
perhaps the tattered dreams of children like Adroa.

Unexpected Mural

I once prayed
in a simple, Midwestern bi-level,
on the outskirts of a simple
Midwestern town,
when on the white wall
of my middle-class family room,
directly above the oak paneling,
I saw a battlefield of blood.

Bowels and appendages
hung from soldiers of all our wars,
young men dazed and bedraggled.
My eyes locked in their sockets;
my ears drummed as I heard
thick, renegade blood
cry out, howl, moan.

I groaned within myself,
overcome by this scene, these sounds.
Ghouls cackled with glee as young
ghost men wandered, stumbled, fell.
And still, that deafening cry—
a mantra of Armageddon—
their life's blood thundered,
echoed, screamed, and proclaimed
a clarion call.

I heard it in my gut.
I saw it past my mind.
I felt it beyond my bones.

Like Abel's on the ground did to God,
the Life within the thing

SPOKE—
and marked my soul forever:
the blood,
the blood,
the blood.

Letting Go

The past gallops into the present and tries to take stake,
robbing us of our now.
It heaves us ever deeply into the space of nowhere,
and in our nothingness, lays waste possibility.
Caught in the constant loop of replay,
the change of outcome I pursue is futile.

My presence is requested in the present,
calling me to turn off the street of yesterday
and enter the boulevard of tomorrow.
As I arrive on Present Drive, I must slow down
and be grateful for the wondrous views of joy.
I must yield to the young and the elderly,
and not get too anxious about the speed bumps
that will inevitably appear.

Before each daily cruise, I fill up
with the cautious honesty of reflection
that allows me to see my true self,
where I am in life, allowing me to gain clarity
of a possible path forward.
Life's mirrors offer a closeup of authenticity
that no one else can see.
They allow me to see beyond the surface
of my brokenness and dive into the depths of wholeness.

The weight of past pain is too heavy a burden to continue to carry.
In walking through life's experiences, I have gained strength.
The time to let go is now. The time is now to be stronger,
to be new, to be wiser, to be grateful.
Now is the time to embrace my better self.

I let go of yesterday and dip my toes
in the dream of what can be;
but first I bathe in the now and what she has to offer.
There is strength in hope, there is wisdom in experience,
and there is courage in the mirror;

I search for it,
I see it,
I become it.

“

*See me, not him.
He wipes away tears;
I rise out of brokenness.
See me.*

*He rejects the mirror;
I embrace the reflection.
See me.*

*He runs from fear;
I leap towards courage.
See me.*

*He is gone;
I am here.
See me.*

Cyrus Cormier

Joyce Carr Stedelbauer

Joyce Carr Stedelbauer is a member of the Poetry Society of Virginia, and has belonged to the National League of American Pen Women for more than forty years. She is also a charter member of the Williamsburg Poetry Guild. She is an inspirational conference speaker and has authored seven books. Her latest book, *Batteries Not Included; Some Assembly Required*, is her personal account of encouraging others who are learning to live again after the death of a loved one.

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Lynn Underwood

Lynn Underwood has been a Building Official until recent retirement. He has worked in the building safety profession and building code development for 35 years. He led a team of inspectors to El Salvador on behalf of the CASA Corps (ICC Ad Hoc Group) to inspect restoration work performed by USAID projects. Before college, Lynn enlisted in the USMC and served in Viet Nam with the 1st Marine Division. He was awarded several medals including a Purple Heart and Navy Commendation, and a Meritorious Combat promotion.

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James L. Garrett

James Garrett is a retired high school English teacher. He and his wife, Suzanne, moved to Williamsburg three years ago. He enjoys reading, writing, and watching the birds in his backyard.





Janice Hoffman

Janice Hoffman holds degrees from Indiana University, teaches writing at the post-secondary level, and is published in literary journals and state poetry anthologies in the US and Canada. She is a member of several local and state writing groups, as well as the Poetry Society of Virginia for whom she edits *A Common Wealth of Poetry*.

Her books of poetry include *Soul Cookies* (High Tide Publications, 2019) and *Azaleas in October* (2021). Her children's books are *Four Fairy Friends* (2019), *Cuatro Amigas Hadas* (2020), *The Official Four Fairy Friends Coloring Book* (2020), and *Four Fairy Friends Celebrate Christmas* (2021).

Jan lives in Williamsburg and may be reached on Facebook at Janice Hoffman Poetry or via email at janhoffpoetry@gmail.com. Visit her website at jan-hoffman.com.



Cyrus Cormier

Cyrus Cormier is both a student and teacher in the principles of leadership. He retired after a 41-year career as an executive in corporate America. As an author, his focus is in the areas of legacy, social justice, religion, and poetry. Cyrus graduated from New Mexico State University and the executive education program at Vanderbilt University. His foundation, *The Twelve Plus One Heart Foundation*, awards need-based college scholarships and a variety of other community service initiatives.

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Award-winning poet Terry Cox-Joseph is president of the Poetry Society of Virginia. She is a member of the National League of Penwomen, and is a former newspaper reporter and editor. She is a member of the Virginia Watercolor Society, Yorktown Arts (On The Hill Gallery), Hampton Arts League and the Peninsula Watermedia Society. Her children, pets and the waterfront provide constant resources for her writing and art. She often works long into the night with only chocolate to sustain her.

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Sharon Canfield Dorsey

Sharon is an award-winning poet and author. She has written four children's books, a memoir, two books of poetry, an anthology, and a travel memoir. *Writing is like breathing for me – necessary for survival. It's the first thing I want to do in the morning and the last thing I want to do at night. I have been honored to have my work published in many anthologies and prestigious magazines like The Pen Woman, the publication of the National League of American Pen Women, alongside the work of such icons as Maya Angelou.*

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Cindy L. Freeman, Editor of The Journal

Writing is one of my passions, along with singing, teaching, playing the piano, and choral conducting. My publisher calls me a “literary late bloomer” because I didn’t get around to writing my first novel until after retiring from a long career in music education and music ministry. I write about women who find the strength to overcome adversity. My novels tackle challenging social issues like child abuse, domestic abuse, substance abuse, and homelessness. But really my novels are about hope, help and healing.

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Gwen Keane

Born and raised in the Northern Neck of Virginia, Gwen Keane graduated magna cum laude from Georgetown University with a Masters in Public Administration. She retired from the Naval Sea Systems Command as the Deputy Inspector General. She serves on the board of the non-profit organization, N2Health, providing health care for all residents in the Northern Neck, and the Northern Neck Partners and Pets, a non-profit organization dedicated to building a no-kill animal shelter.

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