

I'm passing your call to Marian, who will be with you in two shakes of a lamb's tail...Hi! This is Merry Marian! How are you today? I know you are a busy person and so our company will take only a moment with this combo-call. Tell me, do you need any roof repairs, credit cards, or phone service changes? No? Well, how about signing up to win a free ocean cruise. Or you could check out our dynamite insurance policy, or..."

Just musing in an idle moment. Oops! There goes the phone...

Washing dishes

I have no time for washing dishes, but I must make time for just that. Not to be neat. Not to get them done. Not because the counters are crowded. And certainly not just because there are no clean dishes in the cupboard. Heck, I can use paper plates, styrofoam cups, plastic bowls and spoons. Even for the oven, stores carry a ton of disposable baking pans.

The reason I need to find time to do dishes is that I'm desperately in need of mindless drudgery. I shouldn't call it that. There's cause for appreciation, and many reasons to be grateful for the benefits of mindless drudgery.

I remember the thrill of helping Mom at age six. Back then it was a privilege. Mom set a chair beside her and I stood at her elbow. What an achievement. Finally! Allowed to help with the dishes.

All I can say is that was a long, long time ago. By now I know the truth. Dishwashing takes up a lot of

time, dries out your skin, and has to be done again as soon as you're through. A conspiracy, I'm sure.

A sinkful of sticky dishes calls to me again. Sidling up to the edge, I pick up the soapy washcloth and one soaking plate. Rub. Scrub. Swish. Swish. One dish. Two dishes. While my hands are busy my mind lifts off, wandering in search of inspiration. Outside my window is the pleasant hill of the back yard. Beyond that is a hayfield, a river, foothills, sky, and dreams. Yes, day dreams, planning dreams, memory wandering dreams, and Beyond-Your-Wildest Dreams.

That's why the mindless drudgery of dishwashing should have a much more fitting moniker of honor. My soul is what benefits most from washing dishes. While my hands are occupied with a mundane task, my mind sneaks away to an unplanned tryst.

The starting place is always the dishes. But my mind can't be caged. It runs to the fields, just to feel the breeze. Then it sits beside the barn cats taking their siesta in the safety of the goat pen. It chases the birds, watches the corn and pea vines sway in the breeze, follows the dogs on their way to the river. Dots of laughter start a search for the dot-sized children on the next farm. Oh, there they are, under that tree. Then off up into the sky, above the highest-flying birds, to the waiting ether. In the place of uncounted time, I find the inspiration I

needed. I jump up and down and laugh, grabbing at the treasure, stuffing the words in my pocket, in my sleeve, in my wash cloth. Oh, there I am, back in the world. Back to the sink. I had been to the moon to find the thing I couldn't see - the thing that was there all the time. My story words are dancing through my mind and I'm running to the keyboard. The rest of the dishes will just have to wait.

Yes, I have no time for dishes. I just need something to keep my hands busy while I stare out that window.

Boots and Belts...

"Are you wearing those boots to work today?"
It was me asking.

"Which ones?" MyKeeper asked over the lip of his coffee mug.

"The ones with the hole in one."

"No," he answered, "Why?"

"Because I have this belt..." I started to explain. He threw up his hands. "Stop right there. You're doing it again. This is way too early in the morning." Off to the kitchen he went, muttering to no one in particular, "See what I have to put up with?" What he really wanted was some affirmation that he was managing to stay sane even while dealing with me on a daily basis.

He made an attempt to latch onto some cog in the conversation. "What's my boots got to do with your belt? Incidentally, that's MY belt," he added, risking a conversational shift that would take us off the chart before he could get to the end of the first

leg. To avert a dialogue going two ways at once, he asked, "Are we getting to the point yet?"

"Oh, heh-heh, you want me to start at the beginning, don't you?"

"Just tell me the story in a nice straight line."

Too often, I start a conversation in the middle. From there, it can go either way and not necessarily end up at the end. I forget that he hasn't heard the mental conversation going on in my head when I blurt out the part where the question is. I know what I mean, but he misses out on the thing that got me thinking about it in the first place. He hasn't a clue how far the thought traveled in my head before I opened my mouth.

When I pop out with, "Oh, and they'll be here on Tuesday," MyKeeper is left to pry out the supporting facts to find out who, where, what and why.

I've been known to say something like, "Well, Megan said she was going even if no one else did." The blank look on MyKeeper's face signals me I've done it again. The part I forgot to say first is that there was an early afternoon telephone call from Megan about the upsets leading to the probable cancellation of a group gathering, including all the details of her disgust with the falling apart thing after all the work she had put into making arrangements and contacting everybody. All I did

was leave out the long, gradual build-up and start at the most pertinent point.

MyKeeper is used to this. A few minutes later, he was leaning against the kitchen doorway with his second cup of coffee. "OK," he said. "I think I'm ready for this now. Fill me in."

I explained, "My belt buckle broke, even though it used to be yours, and I am going to take it to the shoe repair. I thought I could take your boots in for new soles at the same time."

He shook the early morning cobwebs from his head. Looked to me like he had succumbed to the logic. He thought it over for a minute. With his hand on my shoulder, he looked me in the eye and asked, "What's wrong with saying it like this: I'm going to the shoe repair shop today. I'll take your boots, too."

"Well," I said, "that's simple. Isn't asking better than telling?"

Echoes of the Song

Some songs ring through the
ages — enduring and endearing—
with a beauty like burnished
silver



The yellow bowl...

Punkin had just thrown out a failed recipe of boiled frosting. It was the second flop in her attempt to make a fluffy mountain of icing for my birthday cake. This was the very recipe that frosted her blue ribbon cake at the West Texas Fair two years ago, and now she was having fits.

She was on the phone to me for the second time. "I know what's wrong, Gramma! It needs to be mixed in the yellow bowl!"

The yellow bowl is one of the treasures of inheritance from my mother. From her earliest dishwashing age, Punkin understood the sentiment of the legacy, cautioned by my words, "Be extra careful with the yellow bowl."

One surviving bowl of a gift set for Mom's first kitchen, it would be dated right around 1940, but not one of us kids ever thought about that the number of times it nearly slid off the counter, or while we rapped a mixing spoon against the edge. It endured

the rough handling of a large family who used it nearly every day for one thing or another.

It is heavy ceramic, with muted ridges ringing the top. The glaze is dulled, and it's a little crazed with age, but no more so than me. It has a couple of chips, and on one side is a Liberty Bell type crack from lip to base. As the heirloom survives each use, it becomes more precious for its memory of her. And over the years, it has impressed me with the lesson it teaches about the fragility yet the tenacity of life.

Lifting the bowl down from the cupboard for Punkin, I'm that girl of eleven again for a minute, mixing my first cakes and brownies and cookies, pancakes and biscuits. I can smell the spice cake mix I poured over pineapple and brown sugar, impatient for the aroma of pineapple upside down cake to come wafting from the oven.

Holding the mixing bowl hugged to me evokes a few more pictures from my past: hands forming pie crust dough into a ball, lettuce and tomatoes glistening in their salad dressing, mashed potatoes heaped to the top, capped with a pat of butter and prettied up with paprika.

I'm still surprised each time I pour batter into pans, because the bowl used to be much bigger. When I was a moppet, it was heavy to hold with one hand while spooning with the other.

That sun-colored vessel was big enough to set on the floor, circled by me and my sisters eager to lick the last of the chocolate frosting. It was large enough to contain all the splashes I made while beating 300-stroke cakes by hand. And it held all the leftovers of Sunday Soup till Monday. The soup was better Monday, especially knowing it was almost gone. I think I'm the only one of our large family who didn't like that soup.

A couple of hours later, Punkin came back to the house with her mother and made a finger-licking good, frothy boiled frosting for her grandmother's cake (that's me) in her great-grandmother's yellow bowl. It was a significant moment in history - a four generation link - a fleeting ancestral bond.

Sweet Pea's allowance...

Sweet Pea loomed larger as she approached the driveway. I'd watched her from way down the road, thinking how much she'd grown these past few years. It seemed like just yesterday that we moved to Texas. Sweet Pea came here as a third-grader. Now she's in high school.

MyKeeper, standing beside me, picked up on my thoughts and said, "She hardly resembles the girl who almost cleaned out the collection plate does she?"

His words drew a vivid picture of grade school Sweet Pea on my mind. When we first settled in Texas, MyKeeper and I decided on an amount to give the girls for an allowance. It was supposed to teach them to plan for the things they wanted to do, but it taught us more than it taught them.

Anyway, the allowances were parceled out to Punkin, Sweet Pea, and Peanut on a regular schedule. One week there was a shortage of cash that would

cover only two allowances. Sweet Pea was the one who consented to wait for hers. It was Wednesday.

On Thursday and Friday, Sweet Pea asked if I had gone to the bank for cash yet. Saturday morning she asked if I had forgotten. I reminded her it would be Monday before I would have her allowance.

Sunday morning we filled a pew, stood to sing a hymn, heard prayers and liturgy and sang another hymn. Just before the sermon, the ushers gathered the offering. As the collection plate came to me, I stuck a bill in it and passed the plate into the hands of the usher.

Two seats away from me, Sweet Pea gasped. She fixed me with an accusing glare and whispered loudly, "You mean you gave my allowance to HIM?"

Lesson Plan

A lesson trains
young minds, I thought,
but what the child brought
will always amaze.
How it turned

in little brains,
no matter the plot,
what I thought I taught
is not always
what they learned.

Might have missed...

The other day I was thinking of all the scenes I carry around with me, places on earth that sparkle in my mind, places I wouldn't have seen if I hadn't gone through the struggle to get there.

One view that sticks in my mind is Bridal Veil Falls. It would be beautiful even if we could have driven to see it, but my first glimpse of Bridal Veil Falls followed a lengthy hike in drizzly Northwest weather. We could have stayed by a warm fireplace, but then I would have missed the sight that took my breath away and stopped me in my tracks. We'd been climbing, climbing, climbing, and suddenly, shimmering lace drifted over the face of a broad, smooth boulder. Spray fell like chiffon and feathers, sprinkling into a deep pool below. The waterfall had been there for centuries and eons, but that day I was there to see.

Another hike, I almost walked into a perfect polygonal web drawn between two mountain shrubs by a common brown speckled spider who sat in the

center. The spider was patiently waiting for dinner to come by, unaware of the perfection it had created. I'd seen a lot of these webs, but this rare specimen glistened, taking from the gray gloom a fair mist that robed it in diamonds.

Inclement weather nearly canceled the hike. Instead I carry with me a picture I could never draw. My mind holds it in exquisite detail, ever since that day in my childhood.

Near the end of my teen years, I was included in an October hike. The trail was twisty, narrow, and vertical. We climbed the steep mountainside, dragging the horses that were supposed to follow us. We stumbled past tree roots and fallen logs and intruding underbrush. Pack loads kept slipping over the horses' sides and had to be righted.

About half way up, I scrambled over a fallen tree, lost my balance and fell. My horse's lead rope slipped from my hand. I looked up to see him poised to jump over the log. His front legs were raised, hooves pawing the air. My screams were drowned by everyone else's, and the horse shied back. I can still "see" the horse, huge above me, treetops and sky a vast backdrop.

Five hours later we made it to the top. I was drained. I cried. Someone handed me a candy bar. I ate it, blubbing. All I could think of was that we would also have to get back down.

Revival came in little bits and pieces, broken by sighs. I shivered. We had climbed from cool, clear weather, to snow. I stood up and stretched, then walked a dozen yards to the peak of the mountain while the others put up the tent. Before me was a snow-capped panorama that didn't stop until I had turned a complete, 360 degree circle. We were at the top of the world, standing on a pinnacle.

This alpine view hides in my mind, cradled in mists and clouds and the haunting blue light from an overcast sky. Rusted tin cans were evidence that others had been there, too. But the scene doesn't play to everyone, only those who climb the hill.

It took a great deal of exertion to get to these places. I went there not knowing what I was going to see. Now these treasures go with me, around every bend and up over every hill in my life. I can't show them to anyone. I can't leave them for anyone. They are just there in my mind for me to enjoy, and maybe to pick up as threads to weave into the story of my own spinning.

Clabbered milk...

Do you remember clabbered milk? Likely not. Sometimes the world turns so fast, things of the past just disappear off the face of the earth. For instance, dinosaurs. No one has seen any of those for years.

Mostly, it's only those who have made their way bravely into geriatrics who carry the memory of creatively soured milk with them.

They also remember transportation before cars, spelling bees, treadle sewing machines, box suppers, and the horse- drawn plow. They cranked telephones and the first Ford engines. They stared at the radio in the middle of the living room, and at the first miniature black and white TV screens set in massive cabinetry.

They made their own butter until oleomargarine came packaged in white blocks at the grocers. Pretty soon, all they had to do was squeeze the button on a plastic casing to work yellow color through the blob.