

Well, this school means so much to me. And these are my friends. I want to do something special. It's something I would have appreciated.

Then get off the sofa and back into the kitchen. That's how it'll get done.

The next morning I packed my car with freshly simmered homemade chicken spaghetti and headed to the little school on the hill. By 10:30 Kathy and I had set up a comforting luncheon in the teachers' lounge. Two hours later, after everyone had eaten, we put the leftovers in the refrigerator and repacked our cars with dirty pots and pans.

I was exhausted as I unloaded equipment from the car when I got home and moved on to the bedroom to collapse on the bed for a midday nap. But it was that satisfying feeling that comes from having successfully followed through on a plan.

However, a sandwich tray and chips might be our choice in the future.

Passing Notes

Before we left the lounge that day one teacher brought us a handwritten thank-you note on a Dr. Seuss card. It was cute and much appreciated, but not

necessary. Watching the teachers enjoy the meal was all the thanks I thought I needed.

I realize I have mixed feelings about thank-you notes. Maybe it happened when as a child I was made to write them for Christmas gifts I didn't particularly want, or as a Southern bride when it became an endless task. It seemed a trade-off for all the attention I was receiving. I'm quite sure I passed those feelings on to Carlton, expecting him to communicate in a prescribed way.

Recently I got a thank-you note from a bride-to-be after having spent an hour of delightful conversation with her over a meal. She didn't need to send me a note; I thoroughly enjoyed the personal interaction.

And then there are all the baby showers I have attended, where guests sit around playing with the gifts and reminiscing about what our babies got and learning what's new on the market.

"Don't send me a note," I told an expectant mother, as I left her party. "It was enough to share your excitement."

She sent one anyway.

Thank-you notes aren't a bad thing. But neither is giving for the sheer joy of it, or seeing a gift or kindness once received passed on to someone else. So as my overactive mind began playing with this idea of notes, I thought of other kinds of written communications I felt confused about. Several times a

week correspondence pops up on my computer in the form of e-mail chain letters. Some are clever little greetings or inspirational stories containing well-meaning wishes, but I'm asked to immediately send them to 15 of my closest friends, so these wishes will come true. I balk. It sounds pretty conditional.

My friend Robin forwards a lot of e-mail messages and some are chain letters. I told her I usually don't continue the chain, although I probably did at one time without thinking about it, going into my address book, hitting the forward button and moving on.

"That's OK," she chirped, "Just know that when I send you e-mail, it means I love you."

Oh, what a lovely thought. It still runs through my mind almost every time her name appears, and I tell others of her comment. Perhaps it is my way of forwarding Robin's message.

I received an inspirational story to pass on about someone at the grocery store giving a woman \$50 to buy groceries. Sweet, I thought, and went about my morning routine, but a foundation had been set for the rest of the day. I realized later that in paying bills as part of morning business, I sent a \$50 check to the local food bank. The request had been sitting in a stack on my kitchen counter for several days, but it wasn't until then that I finally acted on it. I was forwarding the e-mail.

After Carlton's death I received many cards and notes, some from people I knew long ago. I was amazed

at the number and variety of people who responded, and I put the messages in a special box to reread periodically. Now when someone I know experiences the death of a loved one, I send a card, which is something I had never done before. It is another way of passing on the notes I have received.

Each of us wants to share love the best way we know how, the way it was shared with us, until we learn new ways. I want to be more deliberate about communicating love now. I want to think and say and do things to give meaning to these abstract feelings.

Two days after Kathy and I served lunch to our former colleagues a thank-you note came in the mail from Stoner Hill. It was a computer-generated design, signed by every staff member at the school. I smiled, reading through the three columns of names and knowing how much effort it must have taken to get all those signatures. Then I called Ms. Allred once again to express my appreciation.

A Writing Day

I usually begin my day writing several pages in my journal. Julia Cameron in *The Artist's Way* calls them morning pages. I jot down remembered dream pieces, review previous activities and thoughts, and plan for the upcoming day.

The obvious things are listed — a dentist appointment, a video that needs returning, a trip to the grocery store if there is no coffee, or Sunday afternoons with my writing friends. Then I follow it with some possibilities I might try.

So one morning began....

There is nothing on the calendar and the day is cold and overcast. Yesterday was a good writing day. Tomorrow I'll be teaching math to nurses for four hours. I want to make today another writing day.

After writing my journal entry I usually go to the computer to read the local paper's headlines and check my horoscope and e-mail. My brother Bruce had sent me a note casually asking about Jake, among other things. Gifted, creative, and sensitive, my nephew reminds me a lot of Carlton. His well-being is never far from my mind. I was not sure what to offer Bruce, but glad to be asked, so I postponed a reply until later, when I had a clearer idea.

My trusted yardman, once the custodian at the middle school where I taught, called. He was available for a pre-spring visit, and my yard certainly needed it. He has taken such good care of my lawn. I didn't want to turn him down, even though I had considered writing at the library this morning.

So I stayed on the sofa writing in my journal, as Mr. McMiller ran the mower outside. I should have been planning a math lesson for the nurses' review class I

had agreed to teach. But rather than getting out the textbook, I got up to load the dishwasher and returned to the computer to reread Bruce's questions. I tapped out a tentative reply, editing and re-editing, and carefully clarifying my input as just opinion, before I offered observations. Help, God, I begged. Let my words be heard in love. This precious ten-year-old, who is funny, creative, and smart, was being told by the world to get serious. He's so much like his dad, and me, and Carlton. Maybe he's like a lot of people. This balancing act is hard. I reread my reply, took a deep breath, and hit the send button to launch my words into cyberspace.

I was now ready to tackle the math lesson. Assuming preparation for a four-hour class would take a while, I was pleasantly surprised when I opened the text to review what I taught the previous semester, and it all came back. I remembered what we spent time on, and how I broke up the long morning session with a variety of activities.

I would begin with a pretest and finish with a review of the lesson's experiences. The rest of the plan was a collection of activities to address possible deficits we discovered along the way.

I went to the education supply store for a new pack of flash cards in case we needed to review multiplication facts. While I was out, I stopped at the grocery store for milk and dog food, and impulsively tossed a couple bags of candy into my cart as

incentives for the nursing students. The day designated for writing was rapidly filling up, and I had written no stories. I was a bit concerned, but still didn't write.

When I returned home the mail had come. Tucked among the advertisements and bills was a postcard Mother had sent. They are her form of e-mail, calling them her "postcards from the edge." This card was commenting on stories I had left at her kitchen door earlier — sections of my book. She had penciled positive, affirming statements; there were no suggestions or concerns. Was she learning to communicate differently? Was I learning to hear her differently?

Encouraged by her words, I went back to the sofa, picked up the loose-leaf notebook holding the stories I had written so far, and began to edit as I read through them. I saw common strands coming together. After an hour of work and feeling energized by the process, I drove to *George's Grill* for an early supper.

George's was not as noisy at that time of day. No clattering dishes sliding into a plastic tub or busy chatter of people connecting around the room, or constant ding from the counter bell signaling a ready order. A hamburger with smothered onions and extra crispy fries, was set before me and in the quieter setting I mentally journaled a review of my day. I had to let go of my plans to spend the day writing, but the day that unfolded had been a good one, spent as a

loving sister and aunt, a competent teacher, and a mature daughter.

I returned home to settle on the sofa. I reached over to turn on the table lamp next to my storyteller doll, as it was dusk before I picked up my yellow tablet and pen to begin writing this story. It was the kind of day I had wanted after all, I scribbled, as I recalled all the activities I had participated in that invited clear and honest communication.

Nursing School

In the fall of 2003, I was asked to finish teaching a study skills class for LPNs because my friend Linda, who had been the instructor, was called to California to help her sick brother and his family. I was not sure exactly what I was agreeing to, but I could use a little extra money from a job description sounding much like the tutoring I did with Avery. So I improvised through the three remaining classes as best I could. Coming in after the semester began gave me little time to assess needs, much less provide for them, and I wondered what to offer twenty student nurses with a variety of academic abilities and experiences.

The next fall I was asked back to teach the study skills class, followed by a math review in the spring. The second course would try to remedy phobias and gaps in learning before the students took Dosage Calculation, a course which needed accurate math

skills. I agreed, beginning the semester with the class, and having a clearer idea of what was expected from me and the students. The program, a satellite of Our Lady of the Lake College in Baton Rouge, was designed to address the local nursing shortage and provide a nurturing opportunity for those who wanted post-secondary career training.

I was quite aware of my own insecurities with math and didn't take the assignment lightly. I had to plan several four-hour review classes for seventeen students who had been vocal about their apprehension. I knew it wouldn't take much to add to those fears. I tried to be reassuring. "We really already know most of what we need. This is just a review." But despite my soothing words, several students flinched when I passed out the pretest.

"It's OK, y'all," I said, trying to find calming words again. "This isn't for a grade. It's just to see where we need to spend our time."

I checked their "tests" during the first break and noted emerging patterns. There were mistakes from carelessness in long division, not remembering how to reduce fractions to the lowest terms, or putting a decimal point in the wrong place. And for a couple of students there was a complete lack of knowledge of Roman numerals. But I found nothing that couldn't be systematically addressed.

I gave the pretests back as they were settling in for the next hour of class, and several began offering

excuses. "It's OK, y'all," I repeated. "This isn't for a grade. It's just to see where we need to spend time."

For the first twenty minutes we reviewed Roman numerals. It went well, as most students felt confident with this information. One still seemed confused, but was willing to hold her questions until the next break.

My plan was to move on to multiplying fractions, so I wrote a problem on the board and immediately felt tension in the room. OK, fractions still stirred a little fear in me, too. I erased the board. We could begin with multiplication facts instead. I pulled out the newly purchased box of flash cards, and we proceeded to play "travel" around the room. One student stood next to her neighbor and I held up a multiplication problem. The person who correctly answered it first moved on to the next neighbor. It was a good review and icebreaker, as everyone had an equal chance to experience screw-ups and successes in front of the class.

After reviewing multiplication facts and building more confidence, I returned to the board and again wrote a multiplication problem with fractions. There was no obvious reaction this time, so together we worked through the equation. There were a couple more group problems, and then the students worked their own from the book, while I took notes in my journal about how this lesson was going. After we finished, volunteers came to the board to share their answers, and the rest of the class checked their work

at their seats. Candy was offered to the volunteers. I was back in fifth-grade teacher mode and no one appeared too stressed.

Four hours later, there had been no mutiny. One student found her problem in regrouping, a simple subtraction deficit, while doing division. Another benefited by working step-by-step with a partner for the first six problems. Those who expressed concern at the beginning of class were now eager to tell me how much better they felt at the end.

What we discovered were little gaps in math knowledge, somewhere from the third or fourth grade, which had evolved into full-blown phobias as adults. In four hours with a little trip back in time, many of these tiny holes were being plugged.

This "teacher" story is about me, a reminder of my own fears and how I have been addressing them. Little gaps in knowledge that have developed into full-blown adult terror. I proceed baby-step-by-baby-step, changing activities, pairing with partners, trying games and group work, and even using candy as an incentive, while I tackle my own shadows. It's the teacher in me taking charge of my own learning.

At the Library

Early one morning after I had enjoyed several productive hours writing at home on my sofa, Princess

wanted a walk. So I put on my tennis shoes and followed her suggestion.

After spending thirty minutes in the fresh air and sunshine the house felt too empty and dark and quiet. My inside voice was still talking to me, but it said, "Go write in public. You know how to do this around people."

I grabbed my woven bag and drove to the nearby branch library to sit in my safe place, a sunny window in the periodicals section overlooking the duck pond. Soon the amazing conversation running through my head was showing up on the notebook page, but I was in public. I didn't want to be a recluse, at least not full time. I've been scribbling and assimilating information for myself, and now I wanted to share it. I was not so special that I needed to be kept under glass like a hothouse flower, just because I journaled.

I had fifty years of being in the world before I started this intense inner journey, and looking back now, those years were certainly not a waste of time. They were the experiences on which my voice is based.

I looked up from my notebook and saw high school girls in uniforms. Could we connect, I wondered? I liked the relationship I shared with my outgoing niece and the self-sufficient Girl Scouts from the cruise.

A solitary young man was looking through the video section. Surely I could talk with him, having seen so many movies recommended by another solitary young man.

There were a couple of older women with stacks of books at the check-out counter. In addition to the fact they obviously enjoyed reading, I might also find common ground with them from what I have learned by getting to know my mother better.

Sometimes I fear I have gone so deeply into my own experience that I am too weird for the general public. The library outing was a good balance to a morning of monk-like quietness.

Just the other day I had successfully taught math to student nurses for four hours. That experience threw me back into the teaching world, where I once knew how to participate. But I confess to having a major panic attack trying to leave the house to teach the class. Having no time to journal, I called my friend Linda, once the principal at the middle school where I taught for nine years. She knew me as a teacher and the connection with her immediately calmed me down.

What is my fear? Am I really who I think I am? Is it because I really like the more-examined me, and I'm afraid the world could take her away? But then that's my choice, isn't it? The more-examined me knows when to retreat when she's running low on energy. But being out on a sunny day is a really healthy thing to do.

I'm still looking for safe places, as I gingerly stick my toes back into the stream of life. It's like that first cold rush in the early summer swimming pool as I let the water ease up to my knees, my waist, and my shoulders, feeling every stage intensely. Sometimes I wish I could just jump in all at once and get it over with.

A safe place is growing inside me as I learn how to take care of myself. That no matter what might happen, I can find the resources to survive, maybe even thrive wherever I am.

Math Anxiety

It was time to teach the algebraic formula called "dimensional analysis" that nurses use to convert medicine dosage, and I needed to review the process again for myself. For two weeks we had reviewed math concepts and measurement leading up to this skill. But my own math fear lurked just below the surface. If I showed any anxiety I might set off every other math-related phobia in the room. The ease Carlton displayed as he breezed through calculus and trigonometry obviously didn't come from me.

The day before class I worked each problem from the chapter in the safety of my living room, then checked it with the answers in the back of the book, step by step, articulating the process aloud. Princess moved away from her place in my lap to a more interesting section of the sofa. Apparently she had no desire to confront her own math limitations at this time.

Slowly and successfully I worked problems one through seven, remembering the tension I felt last

semester working them on the board in front of twenty pairs of eyes. This time my plan was to over-learn each one and be as confident as possible.

On number eight I again named each step as I wrote the problem — identify the given quantity, identify the wanted quantity, and find the path by checking the conversion chart in the book for approximate equivalents. This was getting easier, I mused, quickly jotting down my answer and turning to the back of the book. Arrgh! It was a totally different answer. And, as if that was not enough, my eyes moved down to number nine's answer. It looked like the one I had for number eight. Arrgh, again. Maybe it was a mistake. Maybe the publisher switched the two. I looked back at both problems. It was not a misprint, and I had no idea where the answers came from. It made no sense to me.

I looked at my work again, then checked the conversion charts. My mind started spinning. Where did I go wrong when I thought I was being so careful? Of course that only added a new layer of anxiety to an already shaky situation.

But I immediately recognized that circling question; I had it often. "Where did I go wrong?" Arrgh. It was time to close the book and pick up my pen.

I'm taking a break from math anxiety and conversion charts and dimensional analysis until

I feel calmer. I need to change the subject and find some balance again. Then maybe I'll be able to start my little step-by-step process with number eight again. I'm being reminded of my own apprehension and how I get through it. Part of the preparation for tomorrow's lesson, I guess.



New Life

The End of Winter

One morning in March 2005, I woke with unclear ideas swirling in my head, building anxiety. At that time my mornings were usually calmer or full of new ideas; the unclear anxiety didn't come until later in the day. I picked up my pen and journal to sort out what it might mean.

So what's going on? Why am I feeling so anxious? How can I bring these fuzzy thoughts into focus? I'm beginning to feel out of control again.

This afternoon my friend Kathy and I are going to Jefferson, Texas, to a Pulpwood Queens Book Club meeting. The author of this month's selection will be there. We'll get there in time for the 6:30 meeting, then spend the night at the old Hotel Jefferson down the street. I need to get ready.

I put down my pen and tended to the chores I needed to finish before leaving town. A load of wash,

a call to the vet, a couple of bills paid, and an e-mail to my brother with the hotel's phone number.

But when it was time to pack, I just stood in front of the crowded bedroom closet unsure of what to take. I couldn't find anything. I pulled out five sweatshirts and grabbed several long-sleeved turtleneck pullovers, then took this armload of warmer clothes to the hall closet. The weather was still cool in the morning, but this closet was so full I was getting overwhelmed just trying to decide what to wear.

Next I went to the sunroom to move the load of freshly washed laundry to the dryer and noticed the potted plants that have lived in this room all winter. They looked as if they might benefit from being back outside. It was almost Palm Sunday, the farmer's gauge for our last "cold snap," and these poor plants needed a resurrection. The sunroom is not very bright, and I hadn't been very faithful about watering them. Eight magenta bromeliad blossoms had unfolded in the last two months, as if trying to get my attention. So I dragged these scrawny house plants outdoors to the small, concrete patio just beyond the sunroom door for some healthy nurturing from Mother Nature.

Brushing the dirt and cobwebs from my hands, I officially declared an end to winter. A thorough spring cleaning could be in order, I mused, but quickly dismissed that idea. That's never been part of the season's greeting for me, and I was not that interested in beginning a new tradition now. There was no use

getting carried away. I did, however, sweep around the area where the pots had been, cleaning up spilled dirt and dead leaves.

Then I drove to a nearby department store to buy a pair of basic black pants for the trip. It should have been an easy ten-minute errand because I would look for the same pair of pants in black that I bought in khaki last month. There was just one small problem. It's almost impossible for me to run into this store, purchase one item, and slip out. Something else always catches my eye as I wind my way through the maze of women's separates. This day was no exception. Within minutes I found myself in a dressing room trying on a brightly colored plaid shirt and a blue one with sequins. Sequins! I am not a bright-color, sequin-type dresser. What was this? I looked at my vibrant reflection in the mirror and felt like a flower. I bought both shirts, along with the basic black pants.

Driving home in my pollen-covered car, my spirit was stirred by the neighborhood azalea and dogwood blossoms and the brisk, clean air. Who could possibly resist participating in such an inviting renewal?

My focus was clearer. The swirling ideas in my head from the morning were just preparing me to take my place in the energizing environment of spring.

Looking for Spring

The calendar said spring would begin in two days, but the bright blue skies and budding trees didn't seem to be waiting. It had been two years and two months since Carlton's death and my mission on this day was to take Leah's kindergarten class on a hike around the schoolyard to find spring. We discovered tiny purple flowers on the redbud trees, clumps of yellow daffodils, flitting butterflies, crawling ladybugs, and fragrant wild onion flowers. It was hard to contain these puppy-like five-year-olds in such a playful setting. The surge of spring energy was obviously running through them, too. When we finally got quiet enough to listen for the sounds of spring, we heard a cacophony of birds, squawking much like I did, trying to rein in the children.

Back at home a male and female mallard duck sat in a neighbor's sweet gum tree, but before I had a chance to go outside and point them toward the nearby duck pond, they were off. How could anything stay centered on a day like this? Soon we would celebrate Easter and resurrection and here it was, in all its glory, demanding my attention. The stirring from winter's tomb — emerging sweet smelling flowers, sunny skies, dancing butterflies, lucky ladybugs, frisky children, singing
