Dear Colleagues, Friends and Family, Epiphany 2023

Your presence among the members of my Meditative Council continues to be deeply nurturing and comforting to me this year, as in years past. When I open your holiday greetings and news updates, I recall a kaleidoscope of images and memories of the times Joe and I shared with you, engaged in mission, friendship, fun and collegiality. Those were the days, my friends “we thought they’d never end” -- and I claim the promise that they will continue on, in our hearts, in new ways.

I think I might name this “the year of many accidents.” Thankfully not for my beloved Joe, whose accidental falls, which numbered at least a dozen before he moved to Watson Fields last November, have been none since. Accidents in 2022 were mine. The first happened in late August, a mile away from our home when I was on my way to visit Joe. I turned left onto a county road, as a truck was turning right, onto my side street, but I didn’t see a car, travelling fast behind the truck and which swerved to pass it on the left, and we crashed. My car was totaled. The second was in early November, when I was driving home from choir practice in the dark, just after we turned our clocks back to standard time, and I collided with a deer. Each of these events were shocking for many reasons. I still awaken with visions of being “impacted” by another vehicle, seeing steam rise from the engine, and crawling out the passenger door to be immediately put into a neck brace and taken to the ER. And two months later, driving on a road that threads across unilluminated tidal inlets I remember the white nose of a deer appearing in the headlights, as I slammed on the brakes and felt a soft thump against my car. And still after all the requisite police and insurance reporting, I mourn most deeply the unknown fate of that lovely creature who limped away in the shadows.

These “encounters” have awakened me more fully to the *precious gift every moment life offers* each of us*.* I am more mindful of the beauty of the lovely forests, farms, and tidal waterways within an easy reach of our home in Wells. I’m learning to care more particularly – like allowing leaves and withered stalks to remain over the winter to host insects we’ll need in spring. I am cherishing as precious gems, the narratives put forth by colleagues in my writing group, realizing each of us has a powerful memoir to offer history, whether or not our story is ever published. And I am even more deeply thankful for the memory of music, left intact in the sensory regions that process sound as well as the amygdala, which plays a key role in emotional processing, even while cells in other parts of the brain begin to age and die.

As you know, since November 2021, Joe has been a resident in an Assisted Living Facility in Dover, New Hampshire. In the past I often pictured folks who were moved to memory care facilities or nursing homes as exiles in gloomy, distasteful institutions, devoid of fun, family and anything familiar. In case your image or experience matches that, I want to share some vignettes of Joe’s new “home.” Its founder, Dr. John Hopkins, offers a weekly radio broadcast entitled, *Geriatrics with Humor.* Chuckles and smiles are the takeaways from visits to Watson Fields, for those willing to venture into a new paradigm of elder care. Approaching the facility, is a sign announcing “THE NOT TAKEN ROAD”. And just beneath it, another reads: “CAUTION: watch for wanderers and dreamers.”

Joe’s new residence offers an expansive living-room, with an abundance of easy chairs arranged at the perimeter, or in small groups, or within view of the big screen TV playing reruns of the Golden Girls or MASH or any number of DVD’s from the last century. The far wall, within which sits the TV, is a massive library of classics, more recent fiction, non-fiction – the kind of place I would love to curl up in and just read forever. It reminds me of the floor-to-ceiling bookcases Joe and I enjoyed in the fireplace warmed library of our Maine farmhouse.

Watson Fields offers all residents the chance to have a roommate – in other words to never be alone, and the staff also make sure isolation does not happen. And in the dining areas, no one is ever seated at a table alone. Joe’s roommate is Duane. They both love music, Duane having been a music educator. Sometimes Joe is talkative and Duane is silent; at other times it is the reverse. Joe likes to hum tunes from the Big Band era; Duane likes to “conduct” the music that is playing on Alexa.

When I visit Joe I never know “where” he will be in his disease of dementia. Sometimes he is alert and, in the morning, can participate in games with the larger group. These include activities intended to stimulate eye-hand, and eye-foot coordination. I have observed him becoming fully involved in Noodles (using swim noodles to swat a balloon back and forth); Snow Ball Fight (using soft white balls to play catch or throw to another player); and Kick Ball, using a brightly colored large Nerf ball to ricochet swats across the room. At other times, he can be grumpy, although, according to his caregivers, he might have had a very upbeat morning. I have learned that it is his disease that controls his moods, and we never know what triggers a change from him being happy to being grumpy.

The staff at Watson welcome having fun. For years when our kids were growing up, Joe would assume the voice of Donald Duck and send them into gales of laughter. Now he does that routinely, and no one complains. Joe’s Hospice social worker told him her mother talked to her like Donald when she was a little girl. Joe also imagines himself still playing his trombone and toots songs like 76 trombones, (without his brass instrument) and sings – and the staff chuckle and enjoy it.

In the sun-drenched solarium (on warm days) Joe and I sit and listen to music on my iPhone, depending on whether I sense he needs Frank Sinatra, Tommy Dorsey, Willy Nelson or John Rutter. We languish amid lovely plants, and experience peace, even the Scriptural *peace that passes understanding*. We look out the window and see a bird house that bears a sign: *Cheep Rent.* And I chuckle. I push Joe’s wheelchair out of this lovely place and spot facsimiles of Ernie and Bert, sitting in a chair. Ernie is wearing a COVID mask. And I chuckle again.

When I kiss Joe goodbye, tell him I love him and will see him again soon, I depart content with his being in a new home. And then, as I back up and head out, I turn my head and notice a sign I missed on the way in: it admonishes ***DRIVE LIKE YOUR MOTHER LIVES HERE.*** I smile, realizing that the adventure of dementia and caring for those who have been blessed with it, and their families, can be a lot of fun. It is certainly ***The Not Taken Road*** – and that has made all the difference.

Spending time with Joe as often as possible is still my top priority, but I enjoy social activities with wonderful neighbors here at Wesley by the Sea and friends in the greater Portland area. Our sons’ families are both in Arlington, MA so we manage to keep in touch with visits and FaceTime sessions. Some family updates include:

* After 20 years as Physician at Massachusetts General/Brigham Hospital, Benjamin took a position as Sr. VP of Care Design and Innovation with India-based IKS Health. His work as liaison with major teaching hospitals across the US is to guide, from a physician’s perspective, the design of management information systems that enhance patient care and empower health worker efficiency, effectiveness and wellbeing.
* Karen continues her professional work as attorney for the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection Services, with a special focus on Water Resources. She manages to keep all the “home front systems” working smoothly, including excelling in gardening, gourmet cooking and baking.
* Daniel Joseph, now 22, graduated in May from Elon University with a degree in marketing and communications, and is working with a start-up company in the greater Boston area. He and two friends have an apartment in Medford, MA and his remote work schedule allows him flexibility to spend time occasionally with friends outside New England.
* Matthew Thomas, now 18, is a high school senior, excels in AP courses, serves as goalie and captain of the soccer team, and recently earned his pilot’s license. He has applied to a number of colleges that offer ROTC, as well as to the Air Force Academy. If he realizes his plans, he will be the first in the extended family to serve in the military.
* Jonathan continues as Hospitalist at Beth Israel Deaconess/Boston Medical Center, including overseeing the Global Health Residency program in Botswana. He is the most beloved of all family members by Tessa, their two-year-old golden lab, because, arriving home last, he is often the one who covers the late-night walks and final cuddle-time.
* Jenna, having anchored home management and curriculum oversight during and post COVID, began a new professional position as VP of Care Delivery for *In Stride Health,* an organization committed to providing high-quality mental health for adolescents and supporting the delivery of outstanding care for families in need. She is a powerful role model for her daughters as a woman who “knows her value.”
* Caroline June, now “ten going on twenty-one,” keeps me up to date on the “edge” literature for voracious fifth grade readers. Beginning as a viola student, she chose to switch to piano lessons which she seems to love. She enjoys her dance classes and was a serious soccer player this fall season.
* Fiona Evans, like her twin sister reads “tons”, enjoyed the ‘cello but now is excelling in piano, and often played soccer against her sister’s team. Fiona is an aerobic whiz, as flexible as a reed, and periodically coaches her Dad and me on how to keep healthy by REACHING AND STRETCHING…….

May the New Year 2023 allow each of us to reach and stretch for the Impossible Dreams of peace, justice, equity and compassionate love, *Marilyn and Joe Crocker*