

Magic Moments

When I was a little boy, my mother periodically drove with my brother and me from our home near Kansas City to a tiny town in the North part of our state to visit relatives. Often we stayed overnight with my mother's cousin, Ray, and his wife, Verna. Ray had a big ranch (about 5,000 acres) with cattle and horses. He had Shetland ponies and would saddle them up for my brother and me to ride.

I think every time we went to Harris we went to a graveyard. My mom always walked us around and told us stories about the people under the headstones. Her father is there. He was a wealthy physician in Oklahoma who worked for the Santa Fe railroad. He was shot by a renter one night when he stopped by to collect the monthly rent on a house. My grandmother is there...don't know a lot about her except that she liked "tea parties."

Uncle John is there. My mom told me that when Uncle John died they put a black wreath on the door. Shortly after that all kinds of people came bringing hams and cakes and such. She said she decided there was a direct connection between good food and that black wreath. She had some black pantaloons, she got a coat hanger, and she created a black wreath. No one brought food.

Uncle John was married to Aunt Hulda. I didn't know how to spell her name correctly for many years. Apparently when my mother was a little girl, she called her Aunt Huldie...and it stuck. Aunt Huldie was always very glad to see us. The big wrap around porch on her house creaked as we walked to the front door so there was no sneaking up and surprising her. Her house smelled kind of "funky." She always reached out with both hands, grabbed my cheeks and shook my head around. Then my brother and I would sit while Mom talked with Aunt Huldie.

Mostly, I didn't listen to what they were saying because it was generally about, "Do you remember when..." stuff. One time though I got connected because Aunt Huldie mentioned someone I knew...Ray. She said, "Oh Frances, when I die Ray and Clyde (her other son) will buy big sprays of roses and put me in a fancy casket. **I'd rather be buried in a cardboard box in trade for them stopping by now and then.**" I got the gist of what she was saying, but it took lots of time on our drive back to Kansas City for Mom to explain it to me.

I never forgot that statement.

Years later, Mom yearned for me to "stop by now and then." Every evening she sat out on her front porch and rocked... "trolled" if you will, as various people "stopped by to visit." But, she **LOVED** events. And, at the very top of the **event** list was dinner out. She didn't much care where, so I didn't get any more points for dinners at the Alameda Plaza than at Ponderosa.

A trip to Pella, IA for the tulip festival was just as good as a trip to Paris...and since she had been to Paris and lots of other exotic places, I figured she must know something I didn't.

Mary's mother, Mildred, joined us on the trip to see tulips...where the four of us had a lovely Dutch meal...and celebrated Mother's Day. Based upon the reaction of these two lovely women, you'd have thought it was "Queen For A Day!" The event gave Mother's Day a new definition for me.

My mother's mind was quick and whole to the end of her life when a massive stroke ended all the evenings out. But, my opportunities to create good moments didn't end with Mom's death.

Mildred was the sweetest spirited person I ever met...period. There never seemed to be cloudy days in her life...it was either fine or about to get better soon. She also valued her family "stopping by to visit." She also enjoyed going out to dinner so we had a wonderful foursome.

Before her stroke (that caused severe vascular dementia), Mildred and my wife, Mary, had conversations reminiscent of ones I saw between Mom and Aunt Huldie...but often the subject was about flowers and gardening. Mildred LOVED flowers and her gardens. Regardless, I found it easy to "find things to do while the girls talked."

The physical damage from the stroke to Mildred's brain was huge and immediate. As time passed her dementia became more noticeable. This precipitated a series of moves...from her home of decades to a glorious independent living facility...to an assisted living facility...to private care. Over time, she found less joy in leaving her apartment to go places. So, we often brought small events to her. Those visits were the origin of the Tea Party activities Mary later begin arranging at care facilities. But, that's another story.

During her years at the assisted living facility, we (Mary far more than me) "stopped by and visited." But, one day we hit upon a gold mine.

Mildred and her husband, Jack (whose death preceded her stroke), owned a small farm about 40 minutes' drive east from Kansas City. It was a "get away place" that had little in the way of buildings and equipment but tons in beauty, quiet, and memories of summers when she and Jack took their grandkids there many summers and spent weeks fishing, hiking and bonding.

One day we asked Mildred, "Would you like to drive to the farm?" You probably know what the answer was. She lit up!

On that first drive, I had another life learning experience. Telling stories to a person with dementia is relaxing and enjoyable compared to trying to maintain a "normal" conversation where people bounce opinions back and forth, ask questions, and reminisce.

The drive from Kansas City to "the farm" has a virtually endless number of landmarks to observe...or point out. They aren't, by the world's standards, comparable to the Golden Gate Bridge or The Great Wall of China (which, incidentally Mildred had seen), but they are breathtaking to someone who grew up on a farm and remembers the colors and smells of fields of corn and soybeans.

My learning about using story telling began when Mildred said, "What's that?" pointing to the smoke stack of a small electric power generating plant that serves a tiny farming community along the drive. The short answer would be, "That's a chimney." The story telling answer would be, "That's the big smoke stack for an electric plant. They bring carloads of coal in...see them over there...and they burn the coal to heat water to make steam..."

Only a short distance from the little electric plant, the road climbs a hill, and ahead is a breathtaking vista down into a huge valley that is prime farming land...planted every year in corn or soybeans. When we crested that hill, Mildred said, "Isn't that beautiful!?" The short reply could have been, "Yup." The story telling reply turned into the fact it was spring and the corn was really starting to get tall...see over there, there's a tractor in the field...isn't it amazing how they make all those straight lines...

The trip was an event that hit the emotional buttons of every person in the car. Granny (Mildred) was having a stunning moment, we all knew it, and from someplace deep inside I think I could hear Aunt Huldie says, “Thanks, Bill.” We used about a half box of Kleenex that day.

We decided to do the trip again the next Sunday...and the Sunday after that...and...

As time passed the number of landmarks I pointed out and about which I commented became lengthy. The list was helped by the fact that we learned that Mildred particularly liked trains and rivers. As it turns out, the highway runs parallel to a major train track and parallel to the Missouri River. We always had the natural beauty of the ever changing appearance of the crops, the colors of leaves of trees on the hillsides...clouds in the sky...birds flying by. There seemed to be no end to things upon which to comment on the 40 minute drive.

And, there was a big bonus. Short term memory loss made the trip new each week. It was a joy every time.

One Sunday, we plugged in a cassette tape of old and very familiar hymns sung by a variety of country music stars...Amazing Grace...In The Garden...Church In the Wildwood, etc. Since our family is one that sings in the car, it was a natural that everyone joined in singing as we drove...including Mildred. There was a chorus of off key voices surrounding her, the sounds of big orchestration coming out of the speakers, words of hymns so deeply engrained in her memory that she could and did join in singing songs she hadn't sung for years.

As her physical condition declined, there was less story telling and singing. Sometimes the music played at low volume while she took a nap. She fought sleep because she didn't want to miss a thing.

Finally, her condition was such that she needed to be moved to private care. After all options had been explored, Mary got a clear picture of what to do.

Kneeling by her bed, Mary mused, “Mom I've been thinking.” In a fetal position, hands tightly clinched, her eyes darted to Mary. “I was thinking maybe we should go to the farm.”

After days of not speaking and barely opening her eyes, she looked intently at Mary and said, “That would be wonderful.” In that moment the decision was made.

But, that's another story. You can read about that in the article titled ***SO WHAT'S A YURT?***