

Musings

SUMMER 2014

June 3, 2014: Jack and I



He sits at the water's edge waiting for his ride to work. He writes something, I cannot tell what. He glances up and nods hello as I pass. He's an acquaintance and fellow commuter who still makes the daily trek to his office and back again. His name is Jack.

He's ninety-three.

I've learned a lot from Jack over the years that we've been commuting to work together, though I've never told him so directly. I should. We talk and laugh and banter back and forth about the day's events or, more often, bicycling. He was an avid bicyclist in his day, one of the better bicycle-polo players. In fact, when I first met him about fifteen years ago he was still riding his bicycle to work, pant leg rolled up on one side. He would stop for coffee at the café next door to my office, and I would watch him out the window as he enjoyed his morning repast and the newspaper. Then off he would go to his secret hideout of books and prints and all things artistic that he so loves. He's traveled, made books, taken photographs, had gallery shows featuring his work, and married the love of his life. A perfect life? Doubtful. But a full one.

Not All Bad Comes to Harm You

Nowadays he pretends to be “the grumpy old man” on the boat, but an actor he’s not. The daily flower in his lapel gives him away. I get him. He understands life. The real meaning of true enjoyment, gratefulness, and being present to experience the wonders all around us. Once a few years ago he spent days if not weeks preparing me for my bicycle tour through Tuscany. “Ride gently; take wine and bread and cheese. Stop in a meadow in the midst of your journey and enjoy,” he would say. And when I returned he poured over my pictures from Italy, reliving much of his own experience from his younger years.

I race my bicycle these days, for which he frequently chastises me. “Oh ...” he’ll say, “you are just so competitive. You should stop and smell the roses.”

He is right, of course, and I let him go on because he is sharing a philosophy with which I deeply agree. In his own way, with his own experience, I know he understands that the roses sometimes come in the form of achieving goals once thought impossible. Experiencing the gratitude for the sheer ability to see the roses in the first place is also a way of smelling them. He understands. We agree, Jack and I.



Staying true to the wisdom gained from having cancer is an ongoing process. It’s easy to get swept away by the tide of to-dos. Constantly cultivating an awareness of the present is key to making the most of each day left on this planet. But I’ve found that just being here is key: experiencing whatever is happening around me at the moment; keeping a perspective. These are the things that nurture the soul.

Out on a bike ride one morning I reveled in the sunshine on the east side of the peninsula, while it remained dismally foggy on the west side. I wondered what it must be like to live in one of the luxury homes atop the hill, with a view of all compass points at once. I imagined myself sitting in a sunny kitchen enjoying a cup of coffee, then later, on the deck, toasting the setting sun with a glass of wine. For a moment, I was envious of those who slept under that roof.

Then I thought about a blog post a friend had shared a few days earlier about her second visit to the doctor’s office for a biopsy following a sketchy mammogram. She wrote about her anxiety, her fear, and her relief that she was not diagnosed with cancer. She wrote about her new understanding

and empathy for other friends who had not been so lucky and that she was so very grateful for her health.

I posted a comment: “Stay grateful. Each day is a gift.” I meant it, every word.

And so that day, on that morning ride, I was reminded once again that I don’t need anything. I have my health, I have the love of a wonderful spouse and a terrific family (of choice and of origin), I have a great career, and I live in the most beautiful place in the world. It matters not that it isn’t a four-thousand-square-foot home furnished to the hilt with beautiful objects. Those things don’t matter. All that matters is that I am alive and well and able to enjoy my day and share laughter and love with those I hold dear. I am blessed to have a roof over my head and food in the fridge. Many people have neither of those things, and they have nary a thought about what they might be missing by not living in a luxury home with a view. Indeed, my own tiny condo perched on the hillside would be luxurious enough, they’d say. Perspective; that’s all it takes.

As I’ve come full circle, or at least a good way around the darn thing, I have realized the urging of my friends meant this book should become a reality. Tentative at first, I ultimately embraced the notion of sharing my story with the hope that just one person will read it and take away something useful. I hope you are that person.



September 17, 2014: 48,809 Words